

Jump On Zero

A Novel

By

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*This work is dedicated to my school year
teacher Pat Sutherland for being the first
to spot any kinda potential in a sickly, undersized,
extremely shy child with learning difficulties.
Little did she realise the true extent of it...*

*‘...While listening to the moaning of the wind,
and thinking what a solemn thing it was to move on through
the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss, whose depths
were secrets as profound as Death...’*

*A Christmas Carol
Charles Dickens*

*‘An unspeakable horror seized me. There was a darkness;
then a dizzy, sickening sensation of sight that was not like seeing;
I saw a Line that was no Line; Space that was not Space: I was myself,
and not myself. When I could find voice, I shrieked loud in agony,
either this is madness or it is Hell...’*

*Flatland
Edwin A. Abbott*

*‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness...’*

*A Tale of Two Cities
Charles Dickens*

Chapter One

Every Move You Make

*“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely,
“and go on till you come to the end, then stop.”*

Lewis Carroll

My mother did not know the hassle she would cause me in later years when she decided to name me Tony (not even the more sophisticated Anthony, but simple vanilla flavoured Tony). Especially when my surname was Blair. Sharing the same name as the UK's most loved (rumour) and at the same time, most hated figure (rumour) was fun for about ten minutes, but quickly became a burden of carbuncular proportions.

At the instance of my birth (1970) few folk had heard of the man who was eventually to become the prime minister of Not-So-Great Britain. In recent years, sharing this name has been a considerable hindrance. No one ever believes me. I point out that Tony Blair is a common name in the United Kingdom. I checked the voting register once and found loads of people called Anthony or Tony Blair.

I wrote a novel once. About five years ago. A science fiction story. I couldn't get it published. No one was interested. Out of the fourteen publishers that I submitted it too, three of them said that I would find it impossible to get a book published under my own name because it would be falsely using another person's reputation to gain sales. It would be assumed that it had been written by *thee* Tony Blair and not just *a* Tony Blair. The author photo on the cover would be that of a redhead with a slightly worried look. Nothing like *thee* Tony Blair? How could anyone mistake me for him? Why can't I use my real name? It's not fair! Whimper...

After much consideration, I chose the pen name Jack Carmichael and submitted the manuscript to another twelve publishers. None of them were interested. I looked at the manuscript recently. It was obvious why it had never been published. It sucked like an

Dyson. I guess I'd been so in love with it at the time, I failed to see my babies faults or admit that it had any.

The curse of my name - or is it the name of my curse - has caused me a more than a few unpleasant moments. For example, one Wednesday night (ages ago), I got arrested for trespassing. Wasn't up to anything. Just took a shortcut through a building site on the way home from the sports centre. Unfortunately, I was spotted by a plod who taking a fly cigarette break and taken for a short ride in a police van. The trouble began when I was asked my name. When I told them, I was instantly put in the category of wise guy or as the desk sergeant later put it, "You're nothing but a wee two-faced shackly arsed bachal!" No, I have no idea what this means?

It didn't help matters that I had no ID on me. To further compound the situation, my small family had only recently moved to Scotland and the police computer had no record yet of me staying at the address I gave. It exacerbated matters when, in my panic, I couldn't remember my National Insurance number. In the end, I got a night in the cells and then let off with a light warning.

"Get yer self some ID son," said the desk sergeant, "With a name like yours, the more ID the better. If you'd had some last night, you wouldnay huv had a nice night in our exclusive bed and breakfast."

The night in the cells had a very sobering effect on me. Not that I was drunk to start with. It was dark, smelly and there was graffiti on the walls. How it was written is a mystery as they take everything off you before putting you in the cell. Even your belt and shoes. On the back of the cell door was a statement written apparently in excrement to the effect that the author wished something rude would happen to the Pope.

In the films you always get a bunk to lie on. In the Burlington police station there ain't no bunks. There is a concrete slab raised out of the floor by about six inches and a further six inches of concrete raised up for the pillow to sit on. Not that you'd call it a pillow. Just a one inch thick square of foam rubber that is thrown into the cell with you along with a thin blanket (after you've signed for them of course as if there is any way you could or want to steal them). As for a mattress, I asked the cell cop about one.

"Mattress? What's that?" he sniggered.

The cell had two of these slabs arranged in an L shape. After I had been alone for a couple of hours, in anxious contemplation of what might be, there came loud abusive

and extremely repetitive shouting from the corridor outside. A few moments later, the cell door was yanked open and the drunkest and certainly the scruffiest person I have ever seen was forced into the room. He had several days stubble and stank. He looked to be in his mid forties. I later found out he was early thirties (only a couple of years older than me). He had long mousey hair tied back in a pony tail. There was a small blue swastika tattooed on the back of his left hand near the thumb knuckle. His drunken gait was exacerbated by a limp.

“See you? See me? See coppers? The lot of them are arseholes,” he slurred and then kicked the cell door whilst going on and on about how the police were all illegitimate self abusers.

“What you in for, pal?” he said as he began to calm down.

“Erm, trespassing.”

“Trespass? There ain’t no such law in Scotland? You’ll get off with it. Am in for murder. Killed ten people because they didnay like my tattoo. Day you like it?” He gesticulated with his left hand.

“Yes, it’s a lovely swastika,” I said stammering slightly with a suddenly very dry mouth.

“Swastika?” he swayed, “It’s a bloody spider ya bam-pot! It’s me name! Spider. Done it myself. You a wise guy?”

“No, I, erm...”

“You better no be matey boy! Don’t you go get any ideas about bad mouthing’ old Spider or your in for a right beefin’. And, I’m just the guy to do it! You see that?” He held up a weak looking fist and shook it in my face. “See it? Day ya see it, pal? Day ya?”

“Yes,” I said rather uncomfortably.

“Good!” he exclaimed and then, without warning, projectile vomited over me. Like a BBC Radiophonic workshop special effect, the foul stuff spattered loudly all over the place. Some of it went down the open collar of my shirt. Amazingly, my trousers survived unscathed. In the following silence there was a sitcom moment when I wiped off a fistful of the stuff in a manner that would have made Oliver Hardy proud. I looked at the handful for a moment, sighed and flicked it onto the floor.

“Sorry, pal,” he weakly apologised. Eyes suddenly glazing over, he slid smoothly to the cold hard floor and passed out.

“Thank you very much, God!”

Using his blanket, I wiped off as much vomit (which was full of the proverbial diced carrots) as I could and then covered the already snoring madman with it. He had not got so much as a single spot of the rank ejaculate on himself.

In deepening depression, I sighed again. I expect this Spider person is what a lot of folk would call, ‘*a real character*’ and a ‘*life and soul of the party*’. In my opinion, he was neither. Just another pain in the arse of life. Again, sigh...

I took his thin pillow, added it on top of mine and curled up on my lovely comfortable concrete slab for a nice extremely bad nightmare filled sleep that was constantly interrupted by Spiders thunderous cartoon like snoring. A few times he mumbled in his sleep the sentences, “...why me...” and, “...please leave me alone...”. On one occasion, he sat bolt upright and shouted, “Ya bastards! I’ll come when it’s my time and not before! Leave my world alone! You do not belong here! You have no right?” With incoherent mumbling, he sobbed himself back to sleep.

Why me?



When I woke next morning, Spider was up eating breakfast without any trace of an apparent hangover.

“Morning. Do you feel better now?” he said disgustingly cheerful.

“Me, feel better? It’s your mess!”

“Nope! Not me pal. I’ll say that much for me, no matter how much I’ve had, I’m never sick with the drink. You were really out of it last night.”

“Me, out of it?”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’ll clean up. We all day it now and then,” he held out a hand, “By the way, I’m Spider.”

“I know. You told me last night.”

“I remember, but you were that out of it, didn’t think you’d remember.” He shook my hand heavily as I told him my first name. There ain’t no way that I was going to tell him my surname.

“Pleased to meet you Tony. I’ve seen you about the shopping centre loads of times.”

And I’d seen him plenty of times. Staggering about clutching a bottle, occasionally even at nine o’clock in the morning. Sometimes he would be having a conversation with himself or warding off invisible wasps.

He gave a wide stretch, yawned and started to pace up and down the cell. He still limped rather badly.

“Ah! Nothing like blowing the old cobwebs away!” he declared.

“Did you hurt your leg last night?”

“Naw? Why?”

“I noticed you limping?”

“Oh that? Naw, that was fay polio when I was a kid. Nearly died. My left arm is weak too.”

I grunted sympathetically and asked him the time. My watch had been taken off me last night and put in an envelope with my name on it.”

“Who cares?” he shrugged.

“I’m suppose to be starting work at 8:45.” I panicked.

“I don’t work. Like old Oscar said, work is the curse of the drinking classes.”

“I’m not in the drinking classes.”

“You a poof?”

“No,”

“You talk like one. Take the day off, matey. Take a walk in the park. Pick some flowers. Hug a tree. Suck a twig. Make love to a squirrel.” He began to pick his nose enthusiastically, “What do you do anyway?”

“I’m a technician at the college.”

“Doing what? Computers?”

“Yes,” I said startled that he had managed to get it spot on.

“Our college? Burlington college?”

“Erm, yeah..?”

“I guess we’ll be seeing more of each other then. I start my HND next week...”

Oh, shit! Maybe he’ll be doing something in another department?

“...Systems Development, Analysis and Design.”

Still, shit!

“That your department?” he said finding a large snotter which he admired for a moment before smearing on the wall.

“Erm, yes...”

I was not at all happy at the portents that were dribbling back from the future to this moment. Luckily, the door to the cell opened and the desk sergeant came in carrying both our possessions.

“You make this mess Spider?” he said.

“No. It was Tony.”

“No, it wasn’t...”

“Makes a change. Spider usually does it when he’s in. Okay, you can both sign out. Don’t let me see you here again Tony Blair or you’ll be charged with wasting police time.”

“Tony Blair? That yer name?” asked Spider in amusement.

“Yes,” I sighed at him.

“Gonnie lend me a couple of votes ‘till next month,” he laughed.

“Never heard that one before,” I glared.

“You check out okay,” continued the policeman, “No criminal record. Not even a parking ticket. As for you Spider...”

“Yeah?”

“See you at the weekend Spider.”

“Kay, Davy,” said Spider.

“Same time as usual. I’ll reserve a good cell for you.”

“Heart of gold Davy. Heart of gold. But I will no be spending ma weekends here from now on.”

“Why is that? Has bevyng been banned all together?”

“No, I finally realised that drinking in pubs every night is a waste of money. I’m fed up getting myself in tay arguments, falling about the streets and ending up in here all the time. I’m cleaning my act up.”

“You talk a good talk, Spider,”

“Gen up, Davy.”

“Heard it all before Spider,” he sighed.

“I mean it this time. It’s not the hangover talking. I made my mind up a few days ago.”

“You didn’t last long then.”

“Och, last night was special. I was celebrating.”

“What were you celebrating?”

“Gettin’ ma giro.”

“Hmm? Your heed is full o’ broken bottles pal. Yer a full blown alky. Face it. You’ve as much chance of stoppin’ as I’ve got of walking to the moon.”

“Am no an alky. I just like a wee drink now and then.”

“Aye Spider. Just a wee drink,” he nodded sarcastically.

I reached into the envelope and found my watch. It was 9:15 a.m! Oh, dear! I couldn’t really take the day off as today (Thursday) and tomorrow were preparation days for the new students (or as I call them - the pains in the arses) who would be starting their first term on Monday.



Fortunately, as I left the police station heading for the college, Spider disappeared off in the opposite direction. It was easier to walk to the college than go back for my car at home. Which is incidentally the same reason I’d been walking home from the sports centre in the first place. Burlington’s road system makes spaghetti junction look simple. Traffic lights and mini-roundabouts every hundred yards combined with a twenty mile an hour speed limit make it a *great* place to drive in.

Until the Burlington Jawman struck, walking was the number one pastime in this small town. When the bodies started to appear, the taxi drivers made a fortune and the numbers of those caught drink driving went up. The Jawman murders stopped as quickly as they started. Even although he (it must be a he - women don’t do such things) stopped killing years ago, recreational perambulation was never as popular as it had once been.

Rumour has it that the Jawman used the jawbones as decorations like horseshoes. Hanging them up with the curve pointing towards the ground to catch the luck. Everyone in Burlington knows somebody who knows somebody else who has been in a house doing plumbing, fixing a windows or something-or-other and saw the jawbone collection hanging on a wall. They were so scared that they never told anyone until one night when they were drunk and swore the confidant to secrecy.

I prefer the other rumour that the Jawman spends his time digging around in Burlington country park looking for the stash of jawbones that he hid in haste and the location forgot. Apparently, he needs them for his experiments. Sexual experiments. The mind boggles...

The college was a good twenty minute walk from the police station. I walked too fast. By the time I arrived, I was sweating like a pig. The drab grey building was right beside the shopping centre. So close that most of the students and a lot of the staff would spend over half an hour of their fifteen minute tea breaks wandering about the shopping mall. It was handy in the bad weather as you could run from the college to the shelter of the shopping mall within about thirty seconds.

The college its self is seven floors high with the Information Technology department on the seventh floor. The lifts carried four people maximum. They were nearly always out of order due to overloading. Many people would not use the lifts anyway as it was well know that during construction, one of the lifts had slipped and killed a worker that was working in the lift shaft at the time. Which lift shaft it was is lost in obscurity, but rumour has it that *both* lift shafts are haunted. I don't believe a word of it. Ghosts do not exist even if UFO's do (this is what my daughter tells me).

When I got to the college that morning, there was a post-it sticker on my computer screen from the head of the department.

"See me Tony when you eventually get here. Yours Percy."

Notice the sarcastic double underlining? What was the old bugger wanting now? He was always coming out with dumb ideas that I ended up having to implement.

"Are you on the internet, Tony?" he said over his horn rims though a mouthful of onion and garlic sandwich. As usual, he wore the same tweed suit as always. You

could see your reflection in his bald patch. Every few minutes, he would comb hair over it, which would instantly fall back re-exposing his shame. If it bothers him that much, why doesn't he get a wig? I sneezed. His small dark office was always dusty and smelt like wet pensioners and stale cigars. In fact, come to think of it, so did Percy. Not that he also looked like a pensioner. He looked much too old for that. Maybe he had just lived a strenuous life full of drink, drugs, smoking and wide-ranging debauchery? Maybe he was in fact only twenty-eight?

"No?" I said.

"Know much about it?"

"No?" I repeated, "But I've got a modem. A external v92 jobbie. Came free with the computer. I only use it for the occasional fax."

"Well you're gonna learn and real quick. Ernie Balzac has quit. You're teaching his class in the second term."

"I'm not a qualified teacher?"

"Tough."

"That's a bit sudden, isn't it? Thought he was in with the fixtures?"

"He had five numbers plus the bonus ball."

"Oh, right."

"Took a photocopy of his arse, wrote on it, *'Kiss my hairy butt you bitch, I resign!'* and sent it to the principal. I gather, she was not at all happy about it."

"I'm not surprised!"

"Yeah, Ernie was the only one with internet experience. We can't afford to replace him. Worked for peanuts so he did."

"Well if you pay peanuts you get monkeys."

"Yes. That is why you are replacing him. This college needs to expand into cyberspace or it will go down the pan. We're already probably the last college in Scotland to offer multimedia studies and data communications."

"Do I have to do multimedia too?" I groaned.

"A little about hardware and software protocols. Application layers. TCP/IP. That kind of crap."

"I got plenty of books on it."

"And the basics of the Hayes AT commands and Rockwell programming."

“Hmm?” I nodded.

“Serial and parallel communication devices. Fibre optics. ISDN and DSL. That kind of rubbish. Just the sort of crap you computer geeks love.”

“What about the multimedia?”

“Sarah is still doing the multimedia as you’d be aware of if you’d read the itinerary I gave you.”

“Do I get more money?”

“No, but you’ll get the sack if you refuse.”

Typical!

“In that case, I’d love to teach it!” I groaned.

“That’s the spirit! It’s only one morning per week spread over two terms. Don’t start until the second term. You can handle that Tony. I’d advise you to start your preparatory work as soon as possible. We’ve got the tutor notes and the course material coming next week.”

“Great,” I said, though it wasn’t.

“Oh, and Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Tidy your self up a bit. That shirt looks as if its been sick on and slept in.”

“Sorry! I was out all night and didn’t have time to change.”

“Hmm? Burning the candle at both ends, Tony? Dangerous. Very dangerous. Stay in more often, Tony. Have a malty drink before bedtime instead beer. Get in some early nights. Find a nice quiet girl to take over from that spiteful ex-wife of yours.”

“She’s not my ex-wife,” I said annoyed and then added reluctantly, “Yet.”

“Make love not war. Take it from one who knows. I was a wild thing in my youth.” Yes, I’d heard such stories from several sources. Now the wild one was just an old fart. Apparently, he was also a closet hippy. Do old hippy farts really burn?

“But...” I started.

“There are some Bic’s in my desk,” he interrupted, “Go get a shave. I’d advise you to keep a spare shirt in your office in case this eventuality reoccurs.”



I couldn't do anything with the shirt so I put my overalls on to hide it (which I don't normally wear). I got the razor and had a quick shave and a wash. I felt all the better for it. Recently, I'd begun to feel tired all the time. Lethargy was becoming a serious problem. Better make an appointment soon to see a doctor.

I spent most of the day adjusting all the local area network security. Not that there is much point. The forthcoming students would rip the security to bits. They always do. College's are really just training grounds for hackers. Little do the students realise that all key presses and mouse clicks on *all* machines are recorded. Any data packets sent down the local area network are copied to my data safe before being routed to their intended destination. In quieter moments, I sometimes have a read of the private mail that gets sent back and forth. There are an awful lot of perverts amongst the staff.

Basically, I let the students do anything they want as long as they don't damage anything. Most of them quickly find out how to turn drive sharing on and do boring things like making the CD ROM drive door slide open and shut on their victims computer. This has been known to drive folk insane.

Another favourite is to copy the class swots work disk from their floppy drive over the network to their own floppy drive. Every student who learns tricks like these thinks they are smarter than anyone else and the first to work it out. Now and then we get a real hacker or two in the classes. No one ever knows about them except for me. Sometimes I have to have a little, ahem, '*talk*' about their activities.

Not that I could really complain. I'd done similar things when I was at university. Of course, that was back in the days when a killer application was supplied on a single five and a quarter inch floppy. Not like nowadays where bloatware applications are the norm. Back then, if you had a five megabyte hard drive on which was stored the big three - a word processor, a spreadsheet and a database - you were a power user. The only real PC GUI was something that Apple Macintosh users had. Microsoft was a small company that no one had heard anything about other than that they made a disk operating system.

I got myself through college with state of the art equipment. The best in the course group. This meant an Atari ST with a full 512k of memory and a single sided three and a half inch disk drive. Armed with a copy of Mini Office and a twenty-four pin dot matrix printer, my essays and reports were the envy of the class, though my Systems

Analysis tutor was not happy with me doing my homework Data Flow Diagrams on the ST.

“If your spent less time mucking about on your home computer and more time doing your DFD’s on paper with a stencil and biro, maybe they would turn out correctly instead of this rubbish that you keep on handing in.”

“But it looks better when printed,” I complained.

“I don’t care how it looks, Mr Blair. Just that its right!”

From then on, I handed in most of my homework in handwritten reports. It seems hard to imagine these days that once upon a time it was frowned upon to actually do computer related homework on a computer. Nowadays, you are expected to hand in reports and essays neatly printed no matter what type of course you are doing. If you are on an Information Technology course, and don’t own a computer, the tutors and rest of the students will look down their nose at you.

While it used to be that a student loan was used to top up the meagre student grant and help you drink your way though college, it’s now needed just to get equipment. No longer is binge drinking viable due to reduced funds, but actually frowned upon. A far cry from my day. At university, I was an amateur alcoholic and gynaecologist. Fun days indeed. Regarding the latter, I still like to keep my hand in. Look up old friends as it were. How the times have changed. Those halcyon days of youth. A decade distant. So fast they dwindle. So fast indeed...



On the way home, I dropped into the post office for some stamps. At this time of day, it is always busy with people dropping in on their way home from work. Not that it would bother me. I could use the stamp machine. Or I could have, if it had been working. Groan! I had to stand in the long queue after all. Whilst waiting, I scanned the wall decorations in a vain attempt to relive the terminal boredom. Amongst the century old dirty and torn posters was a new one.

Free Unmetered Internet Calls With Vinculum Net.

*For a limited period, we are offering 100% free internet access.
We even pay for your phone calls. Free unlimited POP e-mail addresses
and 20 meg website. To qualify for this offer, you have to agree to fill out
and return at least three per week of our daily surveys.*

In computer assembly programming language there is an opcode known as *Jump On Zero*. When this code is called it will decide on one of only two possible actions. Represented by a binary one or a binary zero, these actions could be anything. If the logic of the situation results in a binary one, the current course of action will continue. If the result is a zero, an alternate action would be taken.

In spotting that poster, a major *Jump On Zero* event was triggered within my life. The action for the binary one was that my life would continue as normal. I would get my stamps and then go over to *Dixon's* to get a *Freeserve* internet disk. The other action was to lead to imprisonment, infamy, violence and much worse. Which action did I choose? Zero of course. I jumped eagerly.

There was more information on the poster about their normal internet access in which only local call charges applied. This was no good to me. I wanted the 24/7 (24 hour, 7 day) unmetered access. I lusted after it. I needed it. The reason I never got wired up before was because of my fear of running up a massive phone bill. I did not trust myself. It looked like I no longer needed to worry. There was an 0800 phone number to call for the unmetered setup pack which consisted of a Vinculum Net CD ROM and a free extra large tee-shirt. I made a note of the number in the tiny notebook that I always carried. Funny name that for an Internet Service Provider? Vinculum Net. Wonder what it means? When I got home, I looked it up in a dictionary. Apparently the word vinculum means, '*A Connecting Medium*' which - when you think about it - is actually kinda appropriate.

Just about the time I reached the counter, some one's mobile phone went off. It rang just like that big red flashing hotline phone in the '*Our Man Flint*' films. Waiting in the queue, a few folk behind me, a tall gangly teenager with bad acne and milk bottle bottom lens glasses, was the culprit.

"Hello? Big Dicks sex line," he said, "You're speaking to Dirty Derek. How can I help you?"

Considering the intimate nature of the call, he spoke rather loudly.

“Yes, I’m completely naked at the moment. I’ve got a big bottle of Baby Oil handy. Would you like me to rub some on?”

I and several other customers started to snigger.

“Oh that is good. Your making me big and hard just thinking about it... Hello? Hello?”

He hung up and put the phone away.

“Cut off,” he explained.

I had a fit of the giggles and had to leave in a hurry. Makes a change. A few weeks ago, whilst in the same post office another teenage male had caused a bit of aggro. This young gun looked as thick as shit and twice as claggy.

“Hey, mister?”

“What?”

“I’m gonnie go in front of you. Am in a hurry. Any objections?”

“Wait your turn like everybody else.” The everybody else was three pensioners and myself.

“If you don’t let me go in front of you, I’ll stab you,” He grinned angelically.

“You don’t have a knife?”

“I’ve a Stanley in my pocket.”

“Oh, do fuck off ya big wean,” I said disinterestedly. He took the knife out of his pocket and slipped the blade out.

“Now that you have explained it so eloquently,” I said, “On you go.”

“Ta mate.”

“You mind if I go in front of you, Granny? I’m in a hurry,” he said to the woman in front of me. She and the other two old gents didn’t mind. Life is that much simpler if you do not stand up for yourself. Don’t you think?

“Kids today,” said one of the men, “What can you do with them?”

“Bring back national service?” I said.

“Huh,” commented the other old gent, “That’s your generations answer to everything.”



Before I went home, I nipped into Asda supermarket for some supplies. I got a twelve pack of crisps, a sack of mini Mars Bars, a jar of pickled eggs and a six pack of my favourite cheap (extremely weak) lager. Ever since Ruth left me taking our daughter, Poppy, I have not been bothering to cook and eat like an utter slob. We originally moved to Burlington because her mother had spotted the job at the college. Turned out that Ruth had put our name on the Burlington Councils housing list over two years previously and not bothered mentioning it to me.

A while back, we had the be all and end all of arguments which resulted in Ruth going off to live at her mothers. I still don't know what the argument was about. It covered a vast area. Ruth says that she will not come back until I give a very *big* apology. Recently I gave in and apologised.

"What for?" she asked.

"Our argument. I was wrong and you were right."

"Yes," she said, "But, what are you apologising about?"

"Whatever you want. What do you want me to apologise about?"

"If you don't know, I'm not telling you." So saying she left slamming the door heavily.

Women, eh? Can't live with them and you can't live *with* them.

Actually, I adore women. Deeply respect them. Honest! Anyone who can, in extreme pain, pull a whole person out from insides themselves, bloody well impresses the hell out of me. Imagine walking about with a bowling ball strapped to your abdomen for nine months. All the time pressing uncomfortably on your bladder. The veins in your legs hurting. The vomiting and the bad sleep. The excessive emotions generated by the local corner shop running out of Snickers bars. And then eventually, when you've just about got used to it, voiding the bowling ball in a well lit room full of strangers. Impressive ain't the word for it...

I meet up with Ruth from time to time. Poppy stays over nearly every weekend. She is as cute as a button and smart as a whip, but kinda immature even for a twelve year old. She is inclined to burst out crying if you say *no* to her. When she is not crying, she talks non-stop. The only time I get a break is when she goes up to my study to use the computer. Strangely enough for a young girl, she is really into computer

programming. Probably knows more about coding C++ than I do. Lara Croft and her kind don't often get a look in. When Poppy is staying we eat take-a-way meals. She nags me about my eating habits and I love her to bits for it. Well actually, if the truth be told, I still love Ruth to bits too, but I wouldn't tell either of them that.



When I got home, the house was as bereft as usual. In fact, the whole neighbourhood was as cheerful as a graveyard. The other houses in our block of six were equally as silent, dark, lonely and brooding as mine.

As I hung my coat up, a strange voice came from the living room. Someone was talking to themselves and sniggering all the while. I went to the kitchen and got a bread knife. I crept to the living room door which was open by a good foot or so.

"I've got a knife and I'm not afraid to use it."

Silence.

"Get out of my house now and no one will get hurt," I said firmly, hoping that I sounded a lot calmer than I felt.

The intruder laughed loudly and then cackled like an old movie villain.

"I'm not kidding!"

This brought more laughter. Slowly, I eased the door open wider and entered the room. The intruder was sitting as large as life and twice as arrogant on my sofa. He watched me closely for a moment and then began to jump up and down singing.

"Tell me what you want. What you really really want..." he sang.

I lowered the knife. Considering his size, the intruder had an astonishingly loud voice.

"How did you get in?" I asked. The window was open. Must have left it open last night?

"Zig-a-zig. Ah!"

The intruder was a rather handsome grey cockatiel with orange face spots. If it is true what they say about their spots, the intruder was male. Indeed, there was an extremely macho look about him. He gave a short flutter and landed on my shoulder.

"Love, love me do. You know I love you," he sang and nibbled at my ear.

“Don’t! Tickles!” I carefully brushed him off my shoulder. He flew onto the nearby glass topped coffee table where he promptly dropped a load on the glass.

“Hahahahahahah! Fooled you!” he cackled and blew a large raspberry.

I couldn’t help, but laugh. Instantly deciding that I liked the cut of his giblets. He could stay the night. There was no way he was staying any longer. I’d decide what to do with him in the morning.

Found Grey Male Cockatiel.

Amazing Talker And Spice Girl Fan.

Contact Tony Blair #11 Jacob’s St.

After our dog Butch (a very large soppy mongrel mastiff named by Poppy after the dog in Tom And Jerry) passed on over a year ago, I swore that I’d never get another pet. Broke my heart so it did. Who wants to have a best friend if you know they will never make it into their second decade?

Recently we’d got a *sort of* pet. Poppy dragged Ruth and I up to Burlington country park for the animal auctions. They were in severe financial difficulties. If money wasn’t found from somewhere and soon, they would have to close the park. In the animal auctions, you could buy an animal on the condition that it continued to stay at the park. You were also expected to donate a few pounds a week to help look after it. A nice idea really.

I love animals (as long as they do not crawl, slither or undulate), though not in the biblical way. Prefer them to most humans. Make a friend of an animal and your friends for life. Anyone who has not lived with an animal will not believe that they can act so human like. They have their own personalities, sense of humour, eccentricities and hang ups. Butch would not eat anything he saw coming out of a tin. He thought that he was human. As such, he expected to be fed from a plate. If you spooned something out of a pot or a plate into his dish then he was quite happy. Didn’t matter that he was eating dog food as long as he didn’t see it coming out of the tin. Given the chance, I expect that he would have been even happier eating at the kitchen table.

There are not enough charities for animals. It’s all very well contributing to cancer research, cerebral palsy or things like that, but a considerable amount of animals who

need assistance need it due to victimisation from human beings. As such, it is our duty to help them.

Nevertheless, I had no intention of bidding for anything. Then Petal came along. No one would bid for her. Poor thing!

“Oh daddy! Ain’t she lovely? Just like the one in Bambi. Go on make a bid,” said Poppy enthusiastically, bouncing about pointing. I was still reluctant to bid, but I felt sorry for Petal. Perhaps if I gave a small bid it would start the ball rolling?

“A fiver,” I said.

“Tony!” Ruth swatted my arm and glared at me. When she is angry, one of her eyebrows goes up and the other down and a small V shape appears above her nose. It is just soooooo cute! Poppy shares this trait. Makes my heart melt to see. Whenever I manage to get the both of them to do this, I can’t help but laugh out loud which deepens the grimace. This feedback has on more than one occasion reduced me to a mass of sniggering.

This sort of thing tears me between contradictions. Firstly, I want Poppy to stay a child for ever and ever and ever. Childhood can be such a sweet place. Secondly, I cannot wait for her to grow up to see if she will turn out a beauty like her mother.

Well, actually, if I am honest, Poppy is already the beauty that Ruth never was. I don’t mean to sound nasty, but I can remember Ruth at school in the years before I started to take another type of ‘*interest*’ in her. Plain like most kids. The mandatory pigtails and acne. The dress sense of Mr and Mrs Dull of the clan McBland of Dreary Land. With the personality of a Tasmanian Devil and the predictability of a Rogue Elephant. It was a miracle that we ever hit it off. I was shy, nerdy and the class spanner. After years of disinterest, we got to know each other whilst at the school nature club. Weekly meetings spent grassing on our classmates who collected birds eggs, pulled the legs off spiders or kicked cats.

In later years she blossomed somewhat and developed talents with makeup and clothing. She is only an inch below my five foot seven frame, but as fat as a match with large (ever so kissable) breasts. Whilst, I think that she is beautiful - and I appreciate that I am biased - other people tend to use the words striking and handsome. When it comes down to it, I don’t mind what she looks like. I’ve got her (or rather had her) and that is what counts. Love ain’t nothing but a rose tinting. Who cares?

But, I digress...

A few minutes after the bid and I was the proud owner of a young female skunk. Poppy was tickled pink and Ruth soon mellowed. Since then, we've often visited Petal at Burlington country park and I've become quite attached to her.

Luckily (for us), she was born with a malformed scent gland. The plumbing was there, but it didn't do anything. Petal is no more an odour problem than any wet furred animal. The veterinary examinations turned up a malfunctioning hypothalamus and anterior pituitary gland. This implied that her skunkness could be restored by hormone treatment or a change in her body chemistry such as the onset of puberty, a glandular illness or even the skunky menopause. I didn't realise that animals had a menopause. Apparently most do. As with animal cancer, it is just that in the wild they seldom live long enough to experience it. Whilst a bear with a sore head ain't a nice thing, it is preferable to a bear with the menopause. I wonder if they have menstrual moods swings too?

Unfortunate (for her), other skunks did not like her. To them, she smelled wrong. In her original home in a Dundee wildlife park, she had been bullied, as my mother would have said, '*something chronic*'. At Burlington country park, Petal had an easier life living with the rabbits. She was well liked and often did a bit of proxying for the less capable mothers. Some of the bunnies were fascinated by her diet and would often end up joining her in the odd worm or beetle. Rabbits are nothing if not curious.

I don't know about skunks in general, but Petal is easily as intelligent as any family dog. According to Poppy, Petal is a striped skunk or *Mephitis mephitis*. She also told me what this piece of Latin meant, but I can't remember. I wasn't really paying attention. Poppy taught her quite a few tricks, including how to beg, roll-over and die for her country. She is a beautiful looking animal. Pépé Le Pué would have been after her in a shot.



It took over a week for the Vinculum Net CD ROM to arrive. By then the cockatiel had settled in for the duration. No one had called to collect him. The police and local

animal shelters were not aware of any missing cockatiels. Our family had just grown by one.

Poppy named him Beaky. He turned out to be a real Spice Girls fan. Whenever he heard them on the radio he would dance up and down and often sing along. We discovered by accident, if the window was left open he would fly out, have a bit of a peck about, bark at next doors confused cat and come in again. I bought him a nice bird cage, but he was very rarely in it. I had to stop drinking my lager out of glasses as he would wait until I was not looking and steal it.

When he was drunk he was totally outrageous singing, shouting swear words and generally making a nuisance of himself. He also like to rip at the fabric of the sofa which quickly started to look a disgrace. Any wonder that no one had reported him missing?

When I started to drink out of the can instead of a glass, it put stop to all this boozy behaviour. He had a go anyway, but could not get his beak inside the can. He was *not* at all pleased. Lucky, I don't smoke. I expect that he'd want a go at that too.



I had problems installing the Vinculum Net software. They had taken a copy of Internet Explorer v6 and customised it to the point where it no longer worked properly. I couldn't get the Vinculum Net DUN installed properly at all. Then discovered that it would not let me uninstall it. To get rid of it, I ended up having to repartition and format the hard disk drive. After the long laborious process of putting all my favourite software back on (and Poppy's), I manually configured my own Dial Up Networking connection and my Windows Millennium Edition's built in copy of Internet Explorer v5.5 to work with the Vinculum network.

After these initial problems, everything went smoothly. I started to net surf in earnest. It was lucky that I was on the free unmetered access as I quickly became addicted. I even managed to set up my own website using the free twenty megabyte of server space supplied by Vinculum Net. Their free website was better than most paid for sites. There was a free hit counter, mail form, visitor logging and your own CGI directory. It wasn't as difficult to set up as I'd expected.

At first I started to put up a kinda humorous diary (full of lies). Then, I got a cheap scanner and digital camera and started to fill up the site with photos of Poppy and Ruth and myself. I put up a couple of Beaky and one of Petal. Beaky loved the camera's eye and posed like a good 'un. Petal did not like the camera at all. When I pointed it at her, she started to thump one of her legs up and down in the way that skunks have of warning you that they are thinking of spraying their vile juices at you. Despite not having any of these juices, if it upsets her that much I would rather not take any more photos.

The only time I wasn't on the internet was when Poppy was around. That was because she was as addicted to the World Wide Web as I was. We started off surfing together. Poppy was not at all happy about this and eventually persuaded me to leave her alone. Had I realised what she was up to, I would not have let her surf alone. If I had taken the opportunity to examine the internet history log, I would have discovered that she was spending lots of time on underground websites and regularly contributing to hacker newsgroups.

It's kinda ironic that although I'm an ogre when it comes to spying on the college system, at home I don't have the slightest interest as to what my own twelve year old daughter gets up to on my computer. This was another *Jump On Zero* point in my life. It was the last chance to change what was going to happen. Had I paid more attention to Poppy all the nastiness could have been avoided. I didn't. It wasn't. *Jump...*



I'd been subscribed to Vinculum Net for several weeks, when the excrement really began to hit the rotating blade.

Generally speaking, Vinculum Net was a great organisation. Filling out their stupid surveys was a chore, but a necessary evil. There was all sorts of e-mailed forms to fill out. From what the consumer looks for when buying a new car to choosing a pile ointment. Some of the forms were quite large and intrusive. *Someone* must have been paying a lot of money for all this information?

Anyway, one Saturday night, when I was watching an episode of Coronation Street taped earlier in the week, Poppy came downstairs blubbing her eyes out. Her normally

pretty face was all red and blotchy. It took me some time to calm her down enough to talk to me.

“They’re going to shut down your internet account, dad!”

“Who are? What are you on about?”

Bit by bit, I got the story out of her. It was like pulling teeth with rubber pliers, but I got it in the end. It seems that she had been having a spot of hassle for some time in alt.ph.uk. This is a British hacker newsgroup. She had been asking a lot of newbie questions. The old hands must have guessed that she was a youngster as they were very patient with her lamer questions. All except for one person, presumed male, who went by the nickname of Spockter-Doctor. He would respond to all of her message postings by sending abusive (usually sexual) replies. The others users told her repeatedly that Spockter-Doctor was not one of them. He was a troll. A wandering trouble maker. She should ignore and killfile him, but she wouldn’t and so he was able to continue to wind her up.

Eventually she had had enough and decided to do something about it. What she did was very clever. It was also very dumb. She made up a small program called PictureOfSpockter-Doctor.bmp.exe and e-mailed it to him.

“Ha ha, Spockter-Doctor! I have hacked UR computer and know who and where U are. If U don’t stop annoying me I’ll post your details in all the nasty newsgroups I can find. If you don’t believe that I’ve hacked your computer, take a look at the attached file. It is a picture taken of you through your own famous web cam. My God you are so ugly! Have you been washing your face in acid with steel wool? Why don’t you take a cut-throat razor to your face and make it look a bit better?”

Pretty Woman

Pretty Woman, eh? Poppy always did love that film. This was actually all a big bluff. She didn’t know enough about hacking (yet) to be able to get into anyone’s computer. What the program did was to display a picture of Brad Pitt. While it was being looked

at, the hard disk drive was secretly being formatted. How she did this, I don't know. As far as I'm aware there are safeguards to stop people from doing this sort of thing including several '*are you sure you want to do this?*' type messages.

Apparently, she sent the messages to null device and simulated the pressing of keys to answer yes to all prompts. Like I said, it might not have been a smart thing to do, but for a twelve year old it was bloody amazing! I was proud of her and annoyed at the same time.

The trouble was, she got confused when it came to sending the message and attached program file and accidentally posted it to the whole newsgroup when she had intended only Spockter-Doctor to receive it. After the members of the newsgroup had put their systems back together again, they were fizzing mad with Poppy and told her so in a rather earthy manner.

"U stupid fucking bitch!!!! What the hell did U do such a stupid arseholly thing like that for? I know Spockter-Doctor was taking the piss out of U, but we told U 2 ignore him and put him in your killfile. Why didn't U do that? U would never have heard from him again then. It took me hours 2 get my computer set up again and even longer to get all my customisations back. I am going to complain to your Internet Service Provider and see if we can get your account shut down. FOAD Pretty Woman, U arsehole!!!!"

Slabber Beast

Several others posted similar messages agreeing with Slabber Beast, though not all as polite.

"Don't worry. They can't have the ISP shut my account down," I told her, "All messages are sent through several proxy servers I chained together. There is no way the Service Provider can be traced."

"But they know our e-mail address, dad!"

"Oh! Why did you give it?"

“The newsreader software will not let you post anything unless you include an e-mail address?”

“Why didn’t you just make one up?”

“I didn’t think of that!” She started to cry again.

“Don’t worry. I’ll post a message to the newsgroup explaining that it is not your account and that you are only twelve and will not be allowed to use newsgroups again. It’ll be okay.”

“Not use newsgroups again!”

“No, well at least the iffy ones. I’ll delete them from the groups file and install a hidden key logger so that I can keep an eye on what you get up to in future.” This news prompted a new flood of tears.

“I hate you! Mum was right about you! I hope you die! Really I do! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” She was so angry that spittle flew from her mouth. With that she tantrumed her way out of the room and elephant stamped her way up the stairs to her room where the door was violently slammed. Her CD player was switched on and turned up *very* loud. Kids, huh? What you gonna do with them?



*I feel that I must apology for the behaviour of my young daughter, Poppy. She is only twelve years old and uses the nickname of ‘Pretty Woman’. I realize that she has caused a lot of problems for many of the people of this newsgroup. Whilst you are aware of her motivation, it does not excuse her actions. I should point out that the Trojan horse program was only intended for one particular person who you all know has been bothering her for a considerable length of time. Remember, she is not even a teenager yet. I have had a long talk with her and I will prevent her from posting to newsgroups in the future. Please forgive her behaviour. I will **not** allow it to happen again.*

Tony Blair

The frequenters of the group were surprisingly understanding about it all. Several posted back messages of forgiveness.

*“No probs Tony. I thought she might have been a kid, but didn’t guess that she was so young. Pretty Woman is welcome back anytime, but she will have to be on her best behaviour. They ain’t all as nice as me. If she does anything as stupid as that again some of the guys are going to do a bit more than just format a hard drive. Believe me, you *don’t* want to get on their bad side. BTW - It’s obvious that you are not *thee* Tony Blair, but is that your real name or a wind up handle? :-)”*

Pinhead

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn’t get my internet account shut down. The iffy newsgroups were deleted from the group file. I put a key logger on the computer.

That really should have been an end to the matter. But, It wasn’t so much the end of one thing. It was the beginning of another. Like the ancient curse, we were about to live through interesting times. And Darkness was descending...

Interlude In Darkness One

By the time that Julie was no more, I was already in a dead place. A dark place so fitting as to be tailor made. A force fielded cloistered Darkness of the soul. These places are built without trying yet the dismantling is so damn tedious. Not so much castles as prisons in the air.

Doctor Windsor says that a good therapy is to keep some sort of record. Not so much a diary as a journal. Thoughts and feelings. Doesn't have to be formalised or regular. No one will ever read it. Just to see these self persecutions written down will make them that easier to deal with. That tiny whispering internal voice amplified to the point where I have to take notice. Have to do something. Sort things into perspective. Make sense of this senseless tainting of my life.

This is (of course) a waste of time, but no one can say that I am not willing to try. That I will fail is a foregone conclusion. I don't want to understand. I do not want to forgive. Something wonderful is gone. The hurt is all that I have left. Anger keeps me keeping on and on and on...

Despite what the Doc thinks, I do not blame myself. Nevertheless, I like to think that if we had not had that argument, she would not have been in the high street at that particular time of evening and all that which came to pass could have turned out so differently. Maybe I'm wrong? Maybe it was her time and nothing could have changed the outcome?

Can the fatalists be right?

Is there any freewill in our lives at all?

If so, there ain't enough to go around.

I do not think of her in the hospital. The image that remains is that of her face twisted in anger. Shouting saliva words. A door slamming and a door slamming. To whom did the onerous task belong of the weekly trip to the fish and chip shop? Not my

turn. Not her turn. The maturity of the immature. Escalating indecision pushing a snowball of fate. Death reaching back from the future.

To be killed for shouting at kids? A couple of eight year olds letting tires down. I'd have done more than just shout. What would their maladjusted father have done to me for kicking their backsides or rattling their ears? Julie just shouted and ended up with an fourteen inch Bowie knife jammed down so hard between her shoulder blades that it could not be pulled out. A severed spinal nerve and lungs full of blood.

A fourteen inch blade? What kind of pervert carries something like that about? What kind of bastarding father does such a thing in front of his kids? To actually stand outside a fish and chip shop waiting for the kiddies to point out the nasty woman who shouted at them? To plunge a slice of death into the muscle and bones of someone you have only seen a second ago?

Good citizens watching by the hoard, the assailant restyling her pretty face into a amphoras ugliness. Kicking. Kicking again. Breaking. Rearranging cartilage and bone. Tenderising. Pulping and juicing. The kiddies watch their hero of a father dish out a fair and reasonable punishment...

The operations only prolonged the agony. In a way, I am relieved that the last one did not stretch those last few days into weeks. In retrospect, it would have been kinder if Julie had died in the street instead of those days of pain. Drowning in lungs full of blood. Unable to say goodbye. A single word in the operating theatre. A single word in her eyes. Why?

Diminished responsibility. Diminished - fucking - responsibility? What the hell does that mean? It means a greatly reduced prison sentence. That is what it means. No, not even as much as that. A couple of years of atonement in an pretty modern asylum. All the best food. All the best care. Lying his way to an early release.

It has been said again and again, but the law really is far more than just an ass. I've been so blind. People are the evil of birth. A cancer of conception. Liberty should not be an option. The canker in our society stamped out before it starts to grow. The pensioner who shoplifts. The child who throws stones. Stopped before they get around to ruining lives.

And the accidents...

There ain't such a thing. Everything done to plan. A hidden agenda. An unrelenting dark design. Knowledge of what they do, done in not so free will.

Think of the suffering that could have been avoided if Hitler's parents had corrected him in the proper manner when he wet the bed. When he pulled the wings off butterflies. When he took up politics.

I've realised, after so long in this Darkness, there are no motivations. Things are done because they want to be done. Need, to be done. Demand, to be done. The instrument does not have a choice. Gravitation of that which must be.

It is not enough that the punishment should fit the crime. Not nearly enough. Discourages no one. The Berlin Wallers had the right idea. Vandalise back then and goodbye world for a long long time. The punishment must exceed the crime and the crime and the crime. Judgement is the right of we righteous. My purpose defined. My purpose applied. My voyage begun...

Chapter Two

Hanging On The Telephone

“Some of these spiders could straddle over a common saucer with their hairy, muscular legs, and when their feelings were hurt, or their dignity offended, they were the wickedest-looking desperadoes the animal world can furnish.”

Mark Twain

Shortly after the Pretty Woman incident, I met an old cell mate again (oh, shit). Whilst doing a routine security check, I noticed some of the fake log files were different sizes from their real ones. I'd deliberately made it easier to access these logs than it should have been as a trap for any talented student. Someone called Harry Web had been up to all sorts of naughty tricks and had edited the fake log files in an attempt to hide his tracks. Why was his name so strangely familiar?

Mostly it was trivial stuff - general mucking about - but he had been using the colleges internet link to download masses of porn. A sizable amount was gay material.

I left a message with his tutor asking that he report to the technician as soon as possible. When Harry Web eventually turned up, I discovered that he was in fact Spider. His nickname seems so obvious now. Web. Spider. He didn't look so scruffy and he wasn't drunk, but it was Spider all the same. He came into my small office and shut the door behind him.

“Hi, Tony boy,” he said.

“Oh, it had to be you, didn't it?”

“Had to be me what?”

“You've been hacking about in my LAN.”

“Hey, whoa man! I ain't been hacking nothing! Don't even know what hacking is. Wouldn't do it if I did!”

I picked up a ream of old fashioned continuous paper (the college can be tight fisted bastards at times) and began to read.

“Last Monday you visited the Leather Joy Boys website shortly followed by the Butt Pluggers website and then Bisexuals Ur Us. Also on Monday you downloaded a lot of picture files from alt.binaries.ocks and alt.binaries.lesbians.” Spider was fidgeting nervously and starting to look pale.

“On the Tuesday, you got onto the real good sites such as...”

“Okay, right! Don’t go on about it!” he interrupted, “I was just curious. Don’t tell any of the other guys about it. They’ll think I’m an arse bandit.”

“And are you?”

“Naw! I’m a crumpet man!”

He did not sound very convincing. I later formed the private opinion that Spider played for both teams.

“I’m not telling anyone, anything. I just want to know how you got the password to the modem link.”

“Oh, that was easy,” he smirked, “I wrote a little program that looked like the modem logon screen. When the password was typed in, it stored a copy in a text file in the modem directory. Then it ran the real logon and passed the password on to it as usual.”

“Oh, bollocks!” I declared, “That is one of the oldest tricks in the book!”

“I installed it weeks ago when you were out at lunch. You forgot to lock the office door.”

I had been spying on the network when it was my own computer - the only one without a key logger - that had betrayed me. I really need to review my security procedures. Ping! I had a brainwave.

“How would you like to help me out?” I asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Testing the system. Watching for hackers. That sort of thing. I can’t pay you anything, but the work experience will be invaluable when you get your qualifications and are looking for work.”

“Naw thanks. I won’t be looking for work. It would interfere with my bevyng. Besides, I despise the work ethic. All property is theft.”

A Bolshevik, eh?

“What you doing at college then?”

“It’s fun ain’t it?” he shrugged, “Gets ya out of the house and meeting people. Better than sitting watching *Richard and Judy* stuff all day.”

“If you think *this* is fun, you should have a go at spying on the LAN. You wouldn’t believe the goings on. That really *is* fun.”

“I suppose it would be. Sounds interesting,” he laughed. “Okay, you’ve talked me into it, Tony Boy.”

“Erm, Spider?”

“What?”

“Please, don’t call me Tony Boy.”

We took a while to discuss his duties. I was pleasantly surprised to discover he had spotted other security holes that I’d overlooked. He also had an idea for a backup routine that was drastically more efficient than the current one.

“I must go, Tony. I’m late for the SSADM class. It’s my favourite.”

“Okay, Spider.”

He left the room and had almost closed the door when he poked his head back in, looked very seriously at me pointing a finger. “Nothing said about the arse bandit business, eh?”

“Kay,” I confirmed.

“Good lad, Tony!”

How anyone’s favourite class can be SSADM escapes me? At university, I absolutely loathed and detested all the Systems Analysis classes. Spider must be a few AND OR gates short of a logic matrix? Maybe all that boozing has pickled his brain? Nevertheless, Spider fitted in just dandy. Over the coming weeks we became quite buddy, buddy.



A few weeks into my internet researches, I’d taken to collecting my own personal e-mail whilst still at the college. I couldn’t wait until I got home to do it. Shortly after my discussion with Spider, I logged on and collected my mail. There were four e-mails

in my inbox. Two were spam and got deleted unread. One was the newsletter from SoftSeek.com. The forth was from a nutter.

“Hi Tony. I’ve seen your postings in the newsgroups and you seem like a swell type of guy. Please can you send me a nude photograph of your self so that I can masturbate over it every night before I go to bed? Thank you in advance.”

Darkness

Dirty pervert! My instant reaction was to e-bomb the sender with several thousand abusive replies, but he was using an anonymous re-mailer which meant that I had no valid e-mail address to send anything to. Actually, the only newsgroup that I’ve ever posted to was alt.ph.uk and that was only to sort out Poppy’s problem. That must have been where he got my e-mail address? Oh, well there was nothing I could do about it. Best just forget it.



Before I went home that night, I dropped into the medical centre to see the doctor about my chronic fatigue which was still effecting me. I’d made the appointment last week after registering with the practise. The medical centre was actually closed for the next six months due to refurbishment. In the interim, the practice had moved to some porta-cabins set up in the car park. As porta-cabins go, these looked (on the outside) just like any that I’d ever seen. Standard green rough clad panelling knocked together with wire mesh over the windows. Inside was a different story. There was none of that bouncy hollow sounding floor. It was really rather nice (if cramped) and managed to look extremely unlike any porta-cabins that I’d ever been in. There was a taxi freephone at the reception desk. All the health posters and notices were plastic laminated. There was a large rack fixed to the wall full of all kinds of leaflets and booklets. With titles like, ‘*Living With STD*’, ‘*Getting Rid Of Body Lice*’ and ‘*Dealing With Constipation*’ they were really good things to send to folk that you didn’t like.

The appointment was for five o'clock, but it was well after six o'clock when I finally got taken. Doctor Brown was a fat balding man in his fifties with a very serious look. He wore old fashioned horn rimmed glasses just like old Percy's.

"Tony Blair? Any relation to *thee* Tony Blair?"

"No. None at all."

"Bet you wish you had his money though?"

"Yeah," I smiled.

Well then Mr Blair, what seems to be the trouble?" he looked over the top of his glasses. I explained what was wrong. He nodded a few times and made '*hmm*' noises.

"Well without looking up your notes, I can't suggest anything other than you get tested for glandular fever, thyroid problems and diabetes."

"They are being sent up from my doctors in Berwick-upon-Tweed soon."

"Huh? Soon! That's what they all say. We'll be lucky to see them before Christmas. I've been to Berwick a few times. Nice place. You know Haggerstone park?"

"Yes. For years, I used to go there for the New Years bash."

"The swans still there?"

"Yup. The umpteenth generation."

"Bloody vicious animals. Should be locked up. Not allowed to roam about."

He took a rather large blood sample off of me. There was great difficulty in finding a vein. His needling about hurt like hell. On more than one occasion, I let loose an involuntary whimper.

"Oh, do try not to be such a big baby Mr Blair!"

"I have small veins."

He ignored this remark, removing the needle and sticking it in me again. There was more painful poking about to come.

"Hmm? You *do* have small veins?"

Suddenly, the plastic syringe started to fill up with almost black fluid...

"There we go!"

...and stopped almost as suddenly. More poking about. Finally, it started to flow freely and my arm started to throb. When he pulled the needle out, it took ages before the pinprick would stop bleeding. Eventually, he was able to put a Band-Aid on it. It

was already bruised purple and yellow. When you think about it, the things that you voluntary let doctors do would get anyone else locked up in jail for a long time. Let me out of this place of suffering...

“Give it three or four days and phone in for the results.”



Half way down the road to my house, my arm started to feel tingly, cold and wet. Since it was October, it was already dark. Most of the street lights in that part of town were broken. By the time that I found one that was working, I discovered that the arm of my coat was soaked through with blood. Most of my left side was dark with the stuff. In the jaundiced light of the street lamp, I took off my coat and examined my arm. It seemed to have stopped bleeding all by its self. The coat and my shirt were completely ruined. Why couldn't it have flowed this easily when I had that dirty great big sore bastard of a needle stuck in me?



Arriving home, Beaky greeted me in what had become his usual cheeky manner.

“How's your arse off for love bites?”

“You are a very evil bird, Beaky!” Where on earth had he picked up such language?

“I ain't evil, I'm just good looking.”

I swear that that feathered fiend knows every word that I say. After I put the coat and shirt in the bin, I cleaned myself up, put the kettle on and went upstairs to check my e-mail.

“Hi Tony! I thought that the name Tony Blair was a nickname or a wind up? It ain't. I checked. You're in the phone book. Took a while to track you down though. There are dozens of Tony Blair in Britain. You live at number 11 Jacob Street, Burlington. I'll be coming up to Scotland real soon. Perhaps

we can meet up sometime and you can corn-hole me something rotten? I like it gently, but I bet your a big rough bugger Tony? Hung like a donkey, eh? Thank you in advance."

Darkness

Oh dear! Reading this message made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This was getting uncomfortable. This guy could give lessons to fruit cakes. Could he be serious? Was he in fact coming up to Scotland to see me? Course not? He is just a common or garden loony trying to scare me. Isn't he? Isn't he! Oh, shit!

Wonder what corn-holeing is?



Next morning, the postman woke me slightly earlier than usual with a wild knocking at the door. There were three parcels for me and masses of letters. One of the parcels contained my three free introductory videos from the video of the month club. The other had my five free CD's from the CD of the month club. The last parcel contained my five cut-price software titles which was my introductory offer from the software of the month club. This was particularly interesting as I had not joined any of these clubs. However, it was not as interesting as some of the letters. Most of them were from life insurance, double glazing, fitted kitchens and other such companies, but eight of them were from gentlemen who had seen my advert in '*Red Hot And Randy*' and wanted to buy the soiled underwear as advertised.

Over the coming weeks, I was to receive hundreds of letters from all sorts of adverts that I'd never made. I didn't realise that it was possible to get so many things ordered on a buy now pay later scheme. I received items from Ann Summers, Kays Catalogue, Computer Shopper, Woman's Own, TV Times, Radio Times, OK Magazine, Readers Digest and loads of others. All apparently ordered in my name and as such billed to me. Delivery's of takeaway meals (which I had not ordered) became a regular occurrence as did delivery's of gas cylinders, garden and building supplies. In fact, just about anything that didn't require pre-payment for a delivery to be arranged. Most of

these tradesmen were understanding and took the stuff away again. Apparently they are plagued by such occurrences. A couple of them got really nasty and insisted that I'd ordered the stuff and must have forgotten. One day, I arrived home from work to discover ten bags of cement on the front doorstep with a bill and a *'We called and you were out,'* note.

Also, over the coming weeks, the Burlington fire brigade turned up several times in the middle of the night. So did several ambulances. I had numerous phone calls from animal shelters telling me that they had found my dog, cat, alien life form etc.

On and on it went. Each day bringing new and unwelcome surprises. I came to dread answering the door or the phone. Who was doing this and why? The who was pretty easy. The why wasn't.

"Sorry Tony, but I can't make it up to Scotland as soon as I'd like. I will defiantly be coming, but not for quite a while. What about that photo U were going to send me? I really need something to masturbate with. It's just not the same imagining your face whilst screaming out your name over and over again. The neighbours are starting to get annoyed. They are always banging on the wall to try and get me to shut up. I like their attention. Self abuse isn't fun unless its loud and dirty. Be seeing you sooner than you think Tony."

Darkness

By this time, I was starting to get really worried. This Darkness person had started to dominate my thoughts. I'd even had a nightmare about him. I was in bed with Ruth making love. At the point of climax, Ruth rips off her Ruth mask to reveal a dark shadowy faceless person. In the middle of the darkness was a malformed mouth full of broken, rotten, smiling teeth. Slabbering with laughter, the thing started to strangle me. I woke up soaking with sweat. It was a long time before I managed to get back to sleep.



One morning, I was eating breakfast when the phone rang. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Whenever the phone rings early in the morning, I get worried in case it is bad news. This time, I was scared in case it was my stalker. I needn't have worried. It was Ruth.

"Hi Tony," she said in that great voice of hers.

"Hi, Ruth. Everything okay?"

"Oh, course. Why shouldn't it be?"

"Cause of phoning so early. I'm not even dressed yet."

"I think we should meet up again and talk."

"Yeah, but..."

"In a public place so we can't have a screaming match," she interrupted.

"I was just going to say that. How about Asda's café?"

"Fine. Twelve o'clock today?"

"Suits me, dear lady."

"Ha!" I could hear her smile. "I still love it when you call me that."

"Well, you are dear to me."

"Well, you don't act like it. By the way, Poppy is not coming over this weekend. She's is off school. Full of the flu. Sneezing all the time. Coughing up all sorts of bright phlegm."

"Oh dear! Perhaps I should come over and see her? We can have our talk then?"

"No chance! I'm not having you fawning all over her. You spoil her too much as it is. Hope you're not still letting her use that stupid computer for hours on end?"

"No, Ruth," I sighed, "Yes, Ruth. Three bags full Ruth."

"Oh, do shut up Tony! Goodbye. See you at lunchtime."

"Kay."

"And, Tony?"

"Yup?"

"Don't be late. I'm *not* waiting longer than five minutes."

"Okay." But she had already hung up. Instantly, the phone rang again. I grinned and snatched it back up.

"What have you forgot?"

Silence.

“Ruth?”

Still silence?

“That you Ruth? Speak up. I can’t hear you?”

I began to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Above the deafening silence, I could hear a distant faint humming. There came some low scratching sounds and then someone (something?) whispered something that I couldn’t quite make out.

“I can’t hear you? It’s a bad line.”

Another whisper. Still couldn’t make it out.

“You’ll have to speak up?”

I pressed my ear against the earpiece as hard as I could and strained to hear the whispering voice. Suddenly, a white hot bolt of pain was speared into my head by a very loud high pitched scream. I gave a yell and dropped the phone. Claspings a hand to my ear, which felt as if the eardrum had been burst, I instinctively - if somewhat illogically - tried to run away. I tripped and fell at the foot of the stairs. I’ve never known pain like that before. For what seemed an eternity, I writhed about in a confused state. When I came back to my senses, the first thing that I became aware of, above the ringing inside my head, was the laughing. It was deafeningly loud and quite maniacal. At first, I was that disorientated that I couldn’t work out where it was coming from? Then I saw the handset of the phone staring at me. In my mind’s eye, I again saw that malformed mouth full of broken, rotten, smiling teeth. This time it dripped blood. With a Herculean effort, I managed to hang up the phone. The silence was such a relief. What the hell had just happened?



I was so shaken, it was some time before I could bring myself to get dressed and head off to the college. By the time I got there, I was still in a very great deal of pain. My head throbbed like a virgin inside a prostitute. I was convinced that my ear had started to bleed, but a quick look in the toilet mirror proved me wrong. A small mercy indeed. I was wearing my only other coat and as such couldn’t afford to have it also covered with blood and resigned to the same early grave as my other one. When I got to my

office, Spider was already sitting at my computer typing. He was wearing a Tellytubbies tee-shirt.

“Hi, Tony boy! You late again. You’ll get your self into trouble.”

I groaned a reply.

“You okay Tony? You don’t look good. Had another night in jail?”

I told Spider about the deadly phone call.

“Woo, Tony! Who you been upsetting? Someone used a blast-box on you. A powerful one by the sound of it! Probably damaged your phone.”

“What’s a blast box?”

“Och, it’s really only an amplifier hooked up to the phone line. You’re lucky. It can deafen you. Ear been bleeding? You can still hear out of it, can’t you?”

“Not been bleeding. Can still hear out of it, but it hurts like buggery and there is a loud ringing all the time. When I move my head, it feels as if there is water sloshing about in my head.”

“Hmm? Probably just brain damage?”

“Ha, bloody, ha!”

“Get yer self down to the medical centre in yer lunch break.”

“Can’t. I’m meeting my wife.”

“Who would want to blast-box you?”

I suddenly realised that I could no longer deal with this by myself. I told Spider all about Darkness. He listened intently without saying anything. Occasionally he would nod his head or grunt an agreement. When I’d finished my tale, he was silence and thoughtful.

“What do you think, Spider?”

“I think you’re in deep do-do Tony. I’ve heard of Darkness. He hangs about in alt.hacking.malicious and other newsgroups. Very polite, even when he’s being rude.”

“That sounds like him!”

“I wouldn’t mess with him. He’s got a bad reputation. A real bad dude. Suppose to be an elite hacker.”

“You think he’ll come up to Scotland?”

Spider shrugged.

“D’know? Don’t see why he would have to? If he wanted to annoy you. He could e-mail bomb you, hack your website and all sorts of other weird shit. Why would he need to meet you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I ain’t thinking all that clearly?”

“You can put a wee circuit on your phones. Just a couple of transistors and bits that will monitor the incoming signal and trigger a relay cutting the earpiece off if a pre-set volume is exceeded. It will stop him blast-boxing you again.”

“I already thought of that, but don’t know how to go about it.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Thanks, Spider.” It was surprising the amount of talents this career drunk had. Recently, I had discovered that he was hiding cans of Carlsberg Special in the cisterns of most of the toilets. His own private beer coolers. He was smart enough to realise that mints wouldn’t cure his lager induced dragon breath. Presumably, that was why his breath often smelled of garlic. Maybe he’s scared of vampires?

“Any idea why you’ve been targeted?”

“No,” I shrugged.

“You been upsetting anyone on the web recently?”

“Nope.”

“Och, chances are it is just a random attack. He’ll soon get fed up if you do not react. Just ignore him.”

“Thought as much. When can you fix up my phones?”

“I’ll come hame with you tonight after college and day it then? You got a soldering iron?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll nick the bits out of the electronics department.”

Chapter Three

Thus Begins The Web

*“Whatever it was, it was most awful, and hideous,
and like a nightmare...”*

Edward A. Malone

Ruth was waiting for me outside Asda. She looked more gorgeous than usual, though I couldn't put my finger on what was different. Her normally ample bosom was showing as much cleavage as usual. The rest of her figure was as flat as ever. Even her face wore its usual look of disapproval (I like stern looking women). She had on a short black skirt which I approved of as she has got great legs. It must have been her hair? It was shorter than usual and not quite the usual shade of blond. Has she been putting a rinse through it?

“Hi Tony. You're on time for once.” She gave me a peck on the cheek. She smelled just totally yummy. Talcum powder, soap and something else?

“Mmmh! Love the perfume. What is it?”

“Opium. You should know by now. I been wearing it for about three years!”

“Sorry! I like your new hair style.”

“I haven't done anything to my hair!”

“Sorry,” I repeated and gave a deep sigh. I shifted my weight slightly and nearly fell over.

“You been drinking?” Her disapproving look deepened.

“No. I'm a bit wobbly 'cause I've got an ear infection. When I talk it sounds like I'm speaking into an oil drum.”

“You seemed all right on the phone this morning?”

“It was just a twinge then. It's getting worse by the minute. Hurts like buggery.”

“Tried buggery have you?”

“Not for years. It hurts like a sore ear.”

We went into Asda’s café, ordered two small pots of tea, found a table and took a seat. I got myself a double pack of cheese and pickle sandwiches.

“How’s Poppy?”

“Fine. The snotters are tripping her though. She is in her bed. Mother is keeping an eye on her.”

“How is the old battle axe?”

“Don’t start, Tony,” Ruth warned me.

“She never liked me.”

“Maybe she was right to think such?”

“Probably. I’m a real bad muther. No redeeming qualities at all. A right dickhead if ever there was one.”

“You get out of the wrong side of the bed this morning? Who stole your play-piece?”

“Och, I’m just pissed off with this ear, that’s all!”

“You said, och?” she grinned.

“So?” I shrugged.

“Thought you hated Scots words?”

“I’m picking the lingo up.”

“Hmm?” She took a sip of tea. A blast of oily blue smoke drifted over from a nearby table. I looked in its originating direction. It came from two down and out sitting a short way away. She was a stereotypical old bag lady with about five coats on. He looked like an old wino in a heavily stained duffle coat. Didn’t notice them when we came in? I was tempted to point out to them that this was the non-smoking section, but changed my mind. It was probably the only pleasure they had left in life. Poor bastards.

“They bothering you?”

“No,” I said.

Ruth gathered up her bits and pieces.

“Com’on. I’m not staying here.”

I followed her over to a table at the other side of the café.

“That’s better. Bloody, hobo’s! Why can’t they get a job?”

“Hmm?” I nodded in false agreement. There was a long awkward silence during which we both drank tea. I unwrapped my sandwich and started to eat.

“Anyway, this ain’t getting things sorted out?” she said.

“Hmmm?” I agreed through a mouth of sandwich.

“I have decided that, I’m going to move back in.”

“Great!” I exclaimed. A small round spot of red light appeared on her cheek. It moved up and down her face. Someone was shining one of those laser pens things. They are dangerous. They can blind. I was just about to warn her when it disappeared. I almost turned round to see where it had come from, but didn’t. It might get me in the eyes.

“Tony!”

“What?”

“You ain’t been listening to a word I’ve said!”

“Sorry! Trouble concentrating. The ear, you know?”

“If it’s that bad you better get to a doctor. I was saying, I will only move back under certain conditions.”

“Kay.”

“Firstly, there has to be no more arguing. If we have a problem we can discuss things like the mature adults that we are.”

“Hey, I never said I’d was mature. That’s just a rumour spread about by jealous people.”

“And they were obviously wrong,” she tutted.

“Mm, hmm?”

“Watch what we’re saying in front of Poppy. It’s not good to argue in front of her.”

“But, we’re not going to argue?”

“And I think it’s important that we set aside some personal quality time away from each other. See our own friends. That sort of thing.”

“Ha! Why?”

“Oh, Tony! We were living in each others pockets! That was a big part of the problem. Spying on each other.”

“I wasn’t spying on anyone?”

“Yes you were! It wasn’t just you. I was doing it too. I’m so jealous when you so much as glance at another woman.”

“Hey, I’m not interested in any other women!”

“I know, but that doesn’t help!” She reached out and took my hands in hers.

“You’re still quite a catch Tony.”

I suddenly felt euphoric and couldn’t help but grin.

“You’re not so bad your self dear lady.” She laughed and looked so much like that pretty teenager, that I’d taken a fancy to so long ago at school, that my heart melted. I was ready to do anything to get her back. Get her the moon. Give her the stars. In fact, I’d do anything for her love...



“My mother will have to move in with us,” she declared.



...but I won’t do that!

“Ruth,” I groaned, “You know, I can’t live with that woman!” I broke free of her grip.

“Course you can, Tony! She’s old. I feel so sorry for her living on her own!”

“She’s not old. She’s only in her early fifties!”

“She’ll be fifty-six next month.”

“That’s not old.”

“She is lonely Tony. Still misses dad.”

“Huh! The old bag didn’t have time for him when he was alive!”

“Tony!”

“Well, it’s true.”

“I thought you said you’d try and work this out?”

“I will! I am, but I won’t have *Adolph* stay with us.”

“Still as childish as ever, Tony!”

“You should know? You *are* the master race!”

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“I don’t know!”

“Shhhh! Stop shouting! People are looking.”

“I’m not shouting,” I shouted.

“I’ll see you later.” She gathered up her bits and pieces for the second time. “There is just no talking to you when you’re in this mood!”

“What mood? I’m not in a mood?”

“Goodbye, Tony,” she said firmly.

“Sit back down lady! Can’t we, just...”

“I’ll phone you,” she said rising from the chair. She paused for a second and gave me a withering stare. Not the same glare that I enjoy. She can have an awful bad look about her when she wants.

“Eventually,” she added sternly and stormed out of the café. Well, Tony you handled that great? Spiffing. Just fine and dandy. Ten out of ten. Go to teacher and get a gold star.

“You wanting that?”

“Eh?” It was the old wino.

“The other sandwich?” He gestured towards the plastic pack.

“Oh, right? No. Yes. Oh, take it! Please go away?”

“Ta, mate!”

He snatched the sandwich up and wandered off.



Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve this punishment called woman. Surely all relationships cannot be as stormy as ours? Maybe I’d receive a better time if I’d settled for a relationship based on total and utter sex. What is so wrong with seeing a particular women as a sex object?

Whilst this is all very well and groovy in theory, I just can’t see any of them as primarily sex objects. I see them as people with problems like mine. The catwalk model who looks so good in her domain. Little do the folk at the fashion show realise that she is nursing a week long extremely uncomfortable constipation. Behind the

superficial looks lies a turd so dense and large that it could choke a horse. Her backside throbs from the pain of a carbuncle. Makeup hides the acne whilst her bunions smell of pain. So mortal. So mundane. Yet reality is ignored. The false image dominates.

Perhaps I'd have been happier as a little gay person? In my very limited experience of them, the campers seem to have better relationships. More trusting. More understanding. More communicative. Do they or these more myths? I'll tell you something for nothing, if I had my time to live over again, I'd seriously consider poofing it up. Less hassle. Women, eh? Life is a bitch and then you marry one...



For the rest of the day, I was in a sour mood. When I went home, Spider stuck to his word and came with me to fix the phone which turned out not to have been damaged by the blast-box after all. It took Spider less than twenty minutes to fix the thing up. The difficult bit turned out to be getting the casing open. The other three of my phones were easier and only took a few minutes each.

"How do we test them?" I asked.

"D'know?" he shrugged, "Wait 'till he does it again?"

"And, blows my other ear off? Bloody great stuff, Spider!"

"Hey, stay cool, Tony! I'm doing my best. You need all the friends you can get Tony Boy."

"Sorry! I'm a bit crunchy today."

"I'd noticed. You've been a pain in the arse all day. What you need matey is...."

He opened the large sports bag that he had brought with him and pulled out six cans of beer and a very large bottle of the Famous Grouse.

"A good swally!" He concluded.

"No thanks."

"No, no thank yous, Tony Boy. I'm not leaving here until yer tanked."

"I don't like whiskey?"

"Ya need it, bro. Ya need it. Force yer self, pal! You know you want to?"

And, he was right. I did want one.

"Maybe, just the one, then?"

“That’s the spirit, Tony! Give it a good ‘un! Helps you to forget. Least it does for me. That’s why I started drink.”

“What you trying to forget?”

“Darned if I can remember!”

We settle into the living room just for the one drink. Of course, predictably, one drink led to another, which led to several. As only an occasional drinker, I started to feel drunk rather quickly. Not so Spider, he drunk straight whisky like it was alcohol free and actually nice tasting. I had to put Beaky in his cage as he kept on trying to steal sips of whisky. As the feather brain had recently figured out how to open the cage, I had to tie the door shut. Beaky sulked, glared, and muttered incoherently.

“How come, you’ve always got money for drink, Spider?”

“Ah, now there’s a tale...”

“And?”

“A tale of mystery, intrigue, deception and of accidentally getting paid two student grants which in turn entitled me to double the student loans,” he gave a massive burp at both ends simultaneously, “Ah, good arse!”

“Lucky, eh? Hope they don’t find out.” I said.

“Luck has got nothing to do with it. You make your own luck. Got a mate that works for the student grant people. He did a bit of hackery pokery ‘cause he owed me a few favours. I have a large web of contacts who own me favours.”

“Is that why they call you Spider?” I sniggered.

“Eh?”

“Spider. Web.”

“Oh, right? Naw. It’s a family thing. My old uncle was called Spider on account of his eating habits.”

“Gross!”

“When he disappeared, the nickname passed to me.”

“What happened to him?”

“D’know. He was always wandering off by himself for days - sometimes weeks - at a time. Then one day he never came back. Haven’t seen him in years. He’s blind you know? Was born without any eyes.”

“Blind? And you let him wander about by himself?”

“We didn’t let him. He just went when he felt like it. Although he was blind, he could see very well even in pitch darkness.”

“Sure he did Spider! And he could fly as well,” I sarcasted.

“Straight up, Tony. A couple of fortune tellers have told me that I’ve got powers to.”

“Like what? Austin Powers?” I burped.

“Clairvoyance ‘n’ that sort of shit.”

“Can ya do the Tarot?”

“D’know?”

“There is an old pack somewhere. Hang on a mo.”

The search for the cards quickly turned into a farce, with drawers and cupboards being emptied. Piles of clothing were flung about the room.

“Och, just leave it,” Spider complained.

I would not leave it. I felt an unrealistically pressure pushing me to continue the search. Eventually the cards were found. They still looked new. Ruth had bought them years ago, but quickly got bored with them. It was quite funny when she bought them. It was in the joke shop in the shopping mall. She pointed to the cards in the display case and said that she would like a set. The little old - blind as a bat - lady who worked in the shop fetched the cards, put them in a paper bag and handed them to Ruth.

“They for your boyfriend?” said old bat.

“I’m married,” said Ruth puzzled.

“I see? Hubby into that sort of thing?”

“No. They are for me. For years I’ve been meaning to get a set.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy them deary,” she cackled and winked at Ruth.

When Ruth got home and looked at the cards, she was not at all pleased to discover that they were porno playing cards. In extreme anger, she rushed back to the shop to get them exchanged. Wouldn’t even let me have a look at them, but you can be damn sure that she had a real good look. All the while, pretending to be shocked etc.,

“How do you work them?” said Spider.

“D’know. Shuffle them and pick a couple of cards.”

He did this and picked five cards at random.

“What now?”

“Lay them out,” I said.

Two Of Clubs.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Erm, d’know,” I said.

“What is the point then?”

“Shut up and lay the rest out.”

The Anchoret.
The Hanged Man.
The Devil.
Death.

Silence...

“Oh, shit!” I said eventually.

“Och, it’s a load of rubbish. Don’t mean anything,” Spider said unconvincingly,

“The Death card don’t actually mean death.”

“Then what does it mean?”

“Change. The ending of something and the starting of something else.”

“What about the others?”

“No idea. You have a go,” so saying, he gathered the cards up and handed them to me. I shuffled them for what I hope was an annoyingly long time and then laid four cards face down. I turned the first card over.

King Of Spades.

At the turn of the second card I felt uneasy. With the third I was scared. At the forth ice water was flowing in my veins.

The Magician.
The Hanged Man.
The Devil.
Death.

“What a load of crap!” I declared and swept the cards from the coffee table onto the floor. “So much for so-called bloody clairvoyance! What a crock of the brown stuff!”

“I wouldn’t ignore it, if I was you. Uncle Spider, called it, *‘The Gift’*. Said I would lead an unusual life ‘cause I had been touched slightly by *‘The Gift’*. Apparently, folks touched by it get their destinies linked together.” He opened another can of beer and took a deep suck at it.

“Course they do young Skywalker,” I said and also took a good belt of beer. Unbeknown to Spider, I was scared witless.

“Bollocks to you, Tony!”

I spat beer all over the place. I laughed so hard that I choked. Beer ran out of my nose. I fell off the chair and spilled more beer over the living room floor. Spider looked as if he was going to pee himself laughing. A welcomed change of mood. Thank God.

“Bah!” I sniggered, “Look at the mess! The wife ‘ill kill me!”

“Fuck her!” Spider burped.

“I should be so lucky? I only get to do it twice a year. Once at Christmas and once on my birthday. I’m starting to heal up.” This caused fresh laughter.

The phone rang. Without thinking, I answered it.

“Hello?” I smiled.

There was no one there.

A few quiet clicking noises.

“Hello?” I repeated.

A whisper.

“What? I can’t hear you. Speak up!”

“How’s your hearing Tony? Still sore?” said a polite masculine voice in a London accent?

“How, did you...” I started, but the phone went dead. I jiggled the receiver a few times and the dialling tone came back. Puzzled, I put the phone down.

“That was weird?”

“What was?”

“A man asked how my hearing was and then the phone went dead?”

“The limiter must have worked then?”

All at once, I felt as if I'd been plunged into a bath of ice water. I had a weird moment of unreality. I felt like an insignificant spot on a vast lonely plain. I swear that a wind blew in one ear and out of the other. With these thoughts, the memories of recent event's came flooding back. For the first time in my life, the drink *had* made me forget. The voice on the other end of the phone was without a doubt Darkness.

“You look like you seen a ghost, Tony Boy? Don't let it get to you, pal. You are *too* easily upset. Oh, how I wish I'd met you when I was still a young bad lad. The fun I could have had taking the piss out of you! Have another drink.”

And have another drink I did.

And another...

“What sort of set up you got at home, Spider?”

“Well it's a bedsit with its own toilet and a tiny kitchen...”

“No, I mean your computer setup. You've never mentioned it.”

“Och, just a wee 100mhz Pentium with a black and white inkjet and an old fourteen four modem.”

“Fourteen four? That all? I got the idea that you had top notch gear?”

“Did have. Sold it. The wee Pentium is my backup computer. Runs Windows 95. Does what I want. Well most of what I want.”

And another...

“Why'd you sell it?”

“Needed the money for something.”

“What.”

“Erm, I can't remember?”

“Hmm?”

And another...

Drinking can be very exhausting. Pretty soon, I was as tired as a newt.

“Spider, it's time you beetled off ya big poof. Am going tay ma bed. Look, I can talk Scotch.”

“Scotch is a drink.”

“I know and I can speak it. We've got college in the morning. Shouldn't been drinking on a school night. Would upset Percy.”

“Kay. The drink is nearly finished anyway. I was thinking of going out for some more.”

“It’s one in the morning. The pubs are all shut.”

“I’ve plenty more bevy at the bedsit.”

“Go and get it then. Only don’t come back.”

“I’ll call it a night then? I know when I’m not wanted.”

“You can kip on the sofa if you want. Save you staggering home.”

“Kip? I’ll be awake for hours yet!”

“You do this often?”

“Yeah. Pretty much so.”

“Am knackered!” I yawned, suddenly feeling sick. When I stood up, I had difficulty staying up.

“Is there an earthquake?”

“Naw, yer just pissed, Tony.”

“That’s okay then. I thought it was you?”

“Me what?”

“Can’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

“D’know?”

“What are you on about then?”

“No idea. I wasn’t listening. What about it then?”

“What about what?”

“Oh, do shut up, Spider. Your drunk.”

“I think you need to get to yer pit matey,” so saying, Spider gathered up his bits ‘n’ pieces and set off for home. Whilst putting on his coat, several glass tubes fell out of a coat pocket. Luckily they did not break. I helped him pick them up.

“Why you carrying tubes of glitter about with you, Spider?”

“Because of all the dog shite.”

“Dog shite?”

“Yeah. We got too much dog shite in this town. It offends me.”

“Right. Fair enough. I thought that was the reason. Just one thing though?”

“What?”

“What in the name of Satan’s big ones are you on about?”

“I carry the glitter about so that if I spot a dog shite, I can make it look a bit better. It’s particularly attractive at Christmas. Sometimes, I put party favours in them or cake decorations.”

“Hey, I seen them like that. Last Easter. A dogs mess with little yellow plastic chicks stuck in it.”

“That was one of my campaigns.”

“Yer a daft bastard, Spider!”

“Very probably, Tony. Oh well, I’m off. See ya in kindergarten tomorrow.”

“Night Spider!”

Spider farted a farewell and was off into the raw night limping worse than usual.

Reluctantly and with much difficulty, I locked the house up, checked all the appliances, put Beaky’s blanket over his cage (he swore loudly at being woke up) and was off to my bed. Despite the overindulgence, I knew that sleep would not come easily. Wrong. I was out like a light.



I woke up feeling awful. Bright sunlight streaming through a gap in the curtains. My eyes were gritty with sleep. Vision was cloudy and the air seemed to have a glow about it. I felt extremely odd. Things were *too* real. Something was wrong? I got out of bed. I was still wearing my clothes. I was sure that I’d changed into my pyjamas? Why was I wearing my old scout uniform? Hadn’t that been binned centuries ago? Come to think of it, how come an outfit that I wore when I was nine still fitted me?

I couldn’t work out what time it was as the bedside clock was not working. I checked the light switch. Nope. No power.

I went downstairs looking for my cornflakes. The breakfast cupboard was empty. So were all the other cupboards. No food. No cutlery. No crockery. How had Darkness managed this? Had I been drugged? I opened the fridge. Sitting on the middle shelf was my own severed head. How on Earth had that got there? With dawning realisation, I reached up towards my face and found...

Nothing?

My neck was also missing. In it's place was a pulpy mess in which were two small holes and one big one. My exploring fingers slipped inside the cavities. This probing stung the edges of the wound. This was a dream? No. Couldn't be? Too real. Far too real? I could feel the breath from my open throat as it curled hotly around my fingers. How could I live my life without a head? Could I reattach it?

Reaching into the fridge, I picked my head up. It did not look too good. Silently rotting, it was covered with oozing sores. My fingers went through a greasy cheek. The lifeless jaw flopped open and a maggoty bloody slime dripped out. Why this did not disturb me was a mystery. I felt quite calm. Calm that is, until the ripe dead eyes flickered open, swivelled in my direction and the head spoke to me.

"How's your hearing Tony Boy?"

I tried to drop the head, but it had become glued to my hands. The laughing started. Soft at first. Then louder. And faster. And louder. And faster. The sheer magnitude of the increasing volume vibrating to the bone. Dem dry bones? Then, more realisation. It was not laughter. It was screaming. The screaming of the dying dead. The never lived. The Mighthavebeens and the Nonesuch's. My screaming...



I woke up in a freezing sweat. That was some serious shit. My pyjamas were so wet that at first I thought I'd peed my self. But no, the sheets were dry and my whole body was covered with the dampness. My ear was throbbing again, but the ringing had finally stopped. The red winking eyes of the bedside clock said 2:23 AM. I had been asleep just over an hour? But, that laughing, screaming dream had went on for days? Why on Earth was this matter of Darkness affecting me so strongly? I'm not normally so easily scared? Questions. No answers. Maybe the alcohol as the carry on with the tarot cards had been fermenting away in my subconscious?

I looked in the nearby drawers for clean pyjamas. I really should have a quick shower first, but I couldn't be bothered. It was academic anyway as there were no clean pyjamas. I had to make do with a big floppy tee-shirt. Methinks that it was getting near the time when I had to actually do some laundry. I hate that. And the ironing. Problems. So many problems. Sigh!

Unrealistically sober and too fearful to go back to sleep in case the nightmare returned, I switched on the lights and went through the bedrooms connecting door into my small study. As usual, my Pentium 4 system sat gently humming, crowded into its corner under the shelf's of computer books and magazines. The screen saver was the *After Dark* flying toasters. An oldie, but a classic. Although waste printouts dominated the room, it was some time since my old rather massive laser printer actually worked. I would have liked one of those nice nineteen inch monitors instead of the current fourteen inch one. There was plenty of filthy lucre in my bank account to cover the purchase, but there just was not enough room in the study.

When Ruth had still been living here, she was always nagging me for forgetting to turn the computer off. Since she left I had never once forgot to turn it off even once. I just left it on all the time.

I nudged the mouse and the screen saver kicked out. The background desktop wallpaper was a really good picture of Poppy taken a few weeks ago. She had her long blond hair in twin pigtails and was caught in a moment where she actually was wearing her loathed glasses. What a shitty world I was bringing her up in. I sighed deeply, sat down and double-clicked at the Vinculum Net icon. Might as well take advantage of this wide awakesness to do some net surfing.

Logging in to my favourite Vinculum Net's chat room, I was amazed to find it packed out. I hadn't been in for weeks as I was getting sick of just sitting there waiting by myself for someone to come in and start a conversation. It seems like they had all become night owls?

I spent a pleasant while in there talking the sort of trivial rubbish that everyone talks in chat rooms in the wee small hours. All too soon the Vinculum Net two hour cut off activated its self and my modem cut out. I could have instantly re-dialled and logged back on, but it was now the back of four and lack of sleep was catching up on me. If I went back to bed, maybe I could catch a few hours sleep before work?

Clicking on the browsers close box, the application window animated its self away into nothingness. I did a double take on my desktop wallpaper. I could not believe what I was seeing? I must be dreaming again? Instead of the picture of my lovely daughter there was a close up photograph of a woman's private parts with a daffodil sticking out of it. While I'd been online in the chat room, someone had hacked into my

system, poked about doing God only knows what and left the picture as a calling card. I was not particularly bothered by the picture (I'm as perverted as the next man), but I was horrified that someone (Darkness?) had managed to get through my firewall. Firebird Pro version 2.1 was suppose to be the best firewall about. It is reputed to stop about 99.99% of hackers getting in. Unfortunately, it looked as if I'd just been visited by a representative of the 0.01% of hackers.

I right clicked on the desktop and chose the *Properties* menu item. From the *Display Properties* popup, I picked the *Background Settings* and changed the wallpaper. And then changed it again? And again? The damn picture would not change. It was stuck permanently as the default. How on Earth had he done that? Not to worry. I ran Explorer, found the file and deleted it. Except that it would not delete. I examined the file attributes. Just the archive bit set. Why wouldn't it delete then? Probably an illegal non-visible character in the file name? If so, it was just a matter of re-booting into DOS and deleting the offending picture file. This version of Windows Millennium could access DOS on boot-up as it had that infamous patch fitted.

I shut the machine down. The normal shutdown screen had been replaced by hugely obese black man doing something extremely unhygienic to himself with a cucumber. Seconds later, this was replaced by the '*It Is Now Safe To Switch Off Your Computer*' screen. This screen had been replaced by a picture of a mutilated dead body. Not to worry. I'd just boot into DOS and delete the relevant SYS files where these shutdown screens were stored.

I booted into DOS and deleted the files. On the new re-boot, the Windows loading screen (which I'd anticipated being contaminated and had also just deleted) had been replaced by an extreme close-up of two young men doing something rude to each other. Groan! Somehow the bastard had bypassed the system screens and imbedded his pretty pictures inside the actual operating system. He had also done something that made the system ignore the normal system pictures in their SYS files and only work with the embedded copies. How do you change embedded pictures? I haven't a clue?

I pottered about for ages trying this and that. The desktop picture was back to Poppy's snap, but everything else still had the rude pictures. Nothing worked. In desperation, I re-installed Windows. Half an hour later, it still hadn't made any difference. The filth was still there. The only sure way to get rid of it was to repartition

the hard disk drive (again), format it and put all the software back on from scratch. Oh well, it could have been worse? He could have flashed the BIOS. Now, that *would* have been a real problem! Would probably have had to pull the whole motherboard out and put in a new one.

This would be a long job that I didn't have time for right now. The wee small hours are too painful for this kinda work. Besides, I had to get some sleep. I was starting work in a couple of hours.

In a complete rage, I switched the power off not caring if this unorthodox method of shutdown corrupted the whole hard drive. I regularly backup my data so it would not really be more than a big pain in the butt to re-install everything in the morning. Morning? It was already morning. After work then? Yup. Before going back to bed, I had a strong illogical compulsion to FDISK the hard disk drive. I gave in to this urge and got rid of the Darkness inside my favourite possession. But, Darkness, by its very nature, always comes back. It is as inevitable as death.

*"Hi Tony. It's me again. Did you like the nice photographs I sent you? It's time for me to come clean. You do *not* have a gay admirer. Bet you're disappointed? I know you were looking forward to a real good reaming, but I'm a lady's man. Strictly butter side up. Things are a lot worse than you think."*

*"Some weeks ago, I hacked into Vinculum Net's main server and installed a packet sniffer on your POP and SMTP accounts. I've been reading all your e-mail ever since. All those surveys that you've been so faithfully filling out and sending have been very useful to me. I now not only know your name, address and phone number, bank details, place of employment, reading preferences, hobbies and *lots* of other good stuff. I got some real nice pictures of you and your little family off your website."*

*“ No one formats *my* hard disk drive and gets away with it! You may have fooled the others with that, ‘It wasn’t me, it was my 12 year old kid,’ routine, but you ain’t fooled me. No one fools me. Those who try end up looking very foolish indeed? And very dead indeed. There is nothing more ridiculous looking than a corpse, particularly when it’s chopped up into little itty bitty chunks. It’s time you paid the ferryman Tony. I’m *really* sorry, but I’m going to have to do some not very nice things to you. I have to make a public example of you. Justice needs to be seen to be done. You *need* to be taught respect. It is nothing personal.”*

“I am extremely sorry to have say this (and I hope you don’t take offence), but in all fairness and a precise manner of speaking Tony, I think I should point out that, you are extremely fucked.”

Darkness

Interlude In Darkness Two

Planning is of increasing importance and enjoyment. A spin-off of the methodology used at work. I was always fastidious. The Doc says that I am obsessed. I have to agree. Whilst this behaviour maybe far from normal, it does get tremendous results. Done faster. Done thoroughly. Done right.

It was the planning that made the 'Rupert Project' conclude so satisfactory. Rupert Hollingsworth is (was) the name of the creature who killed my love. What an inappropriate name. Didn't belong to someone like It. A gentleman's name. Someone grey haired and weak. So nice as to be sick making. A natural born grandparent. Not a cancerous entity. Poring Its vile purpose between the cracks. Hammering in the wedge. Depraving. Destroying. Devouring.

At the end, Rupert Hollingsworth was pathetic. All that screaming and begging. So much crying and questioning. The indignation and the apathy.

Such ungratefulness. Was not even pleased when I introduced It to my three best friends. They did not take offence and played with It for hours. Black And Decker, Boch and Stanley. Such good friends. Such close friends. A fine bunch of guys. So reliable. That old saying is so true. It's not what you know. It's who you know.

For example, I know nothing about dentistry, but my three most excellent buddies guided me each step of the way. Is this kinda D.I.Y difficult? No, it damn sure isn't. But, the way that Rupert complained, It must have been some kinda perfectionist.

I learned things from this vile creature. Things not immediately apparent, but I understood them in the end. It didn't tell me out loud. It did not need to. In our teamwork, actions revealed an ugliness called truth.

The solitary purpose of life is the obliteration of the exquisite. Depravity. Corruption. Torture. Pain. Call it what you will. Just names for the destruction of beauty. So many beings devote so much time and energy. It must be their reason for being. Mother Nature is but a disease. Filled with rot. Thriving on decay. The

falseness of the flower prospering by death. A user not a giver. The fluffy animals. Those so cute. And the cutest. Killers every one. The tooth and the claw must be used. Nature wants to kill. Nature needs to kill. Nature has to kill. It kills...

A fascinating concept is happiness. But, it ain't real. Can't exist. Won't exist. Mustn't exist. The natural tendency is for any system to fall into disrepair. Entropy ain't an abstract concept. It is the holiest of the truths. The way of the Universe. The way of existence. I destroy, therefore I am.

I am not a cruel man. Empathy was all I inflicted. Learned inch by inch. Fingernail by fingernail. Testicle by testicle. An ultimate emancipation. It now knows what Julie went through. Knows that what Julie knows. Learned it slower. Learned in greater depth. Above all, It knows. Realises. The error of Its life. In atonement, the karma is repaired. In ending, It becomes He. He is allowed another chance.

So sweet a power. So sweet a purpose. So sweet a restitution. I am become redemption...

Chapter Four

Under Pressure

"That is my least concern; I am, by a course of strange events, become the most miserable of mortals. Persecuted and tortured as I am and have been, can death be any evil to me?"

Mary Shelley

The day I went back to the doctors for the results of my blood test was a right miserable bastard of a day. Ugly black clouds whipped across the sky propelled by near gale force winds. The rain was freezing and drove through clothing within minutes.

Dripping, I sat in the waiting room feeling rather worried. I'd phoned up for the results a few days ago only to be told that the tests were okay, but would I make an appointment to see doctor Brown anyway? If everything was okay, why did I need to see the doctor? The appointment was for 1:05 PM, but I didn't get taken until nearly 2:00 PM. That will please them back at the college.

"Ah, Mr Blair. Do come in. Take a seat."

The good doctor looked a lot happier than the last time I'd seen him.

"We couldn't get your original records sent up from Berwick. There was a bit of a fire in the records room. Lots of records got burnt. Yours amongst them."

"Oh, dear! Was it accidental?"

"Yes. Electrical fault. Not to worry though. They had just started transferring the files onto their new computer system. Yours had already been done. They sent up a copy of your records on disk. Even as we speak, they are being printed out. Now what can I do for you?"

"I phoned for the results of a blood test a few days ago and was told to come in and see you."

“Were you? I wonder why?” he pressed a button on his intercom, “Carol, do you know anything about Mr Blair blood test?”

“Just a moment...” said Carol’s thin crackly voice.

“Found them. Nope they’re okay. Blood glucose is five point three and there is no sign of glandular infection. No problems with the Thyroid. He’s down for the practice medical.”

“Bring the test results through with his records will you?”

“Certainly. Just be a few minutes. The last of the records is just coming out of the printer.”

“Good.” He let go of the intercom button, snatched up a pencil and made some notes on his desk blotter.

“Nothing to worry about Mr Blair. It’s just a routine medical that we give all new patients. Sorry to have worried you. You should have been told about it. You’re blood tests were normal.”

“Well, why do I still feel tired and ill all the time?”

“There are other tests that we can try. Could be a number of things. For now we’ll just take your height, weight and blood type you. We’ll talk about this after I’ve had a quick look at your records.”

“Oh, not another blood test? Couldn’t you have got my blood type last time?”

“That was an entirely different type of test.”

“You could have done them together.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!”

One of the receptionists (a rather attractive older lady) came in carrying a new looking document wallet. She placed it on the desk and quickly left. Doctor Brown didn’t even acknowledge her existence. He took my weight, height, blood pressure as well as testing me for colour blindness. Finally he gave my hearing a test.

“Do you work in a noisy environment?”

“No. I work at the college. Why?”

“There is some damage to your right ear. You have perforated your eardrum. Pretty recent too, by the look of it.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No, Mr Blair,” he laughed, “Far from it. It’s healing nicely. Just wondered how you did it that’s all. Your hearing sensitivity in that ear is ten percent below average. It’s not a problem. Will probably recover in a matter of weeks.”

With that out of the way, he got out the bits and pieces that were needed to take the blood test. He put a tourniquet around my left arm, tightened it and changed his mind.

“Tell, you what? I’ll have a quick look at your records first. I might have to do some other blood tests. Daft to test you now when I can do them all in a oney.”

I sat there with the tourniquet around my arm while he looked through my file. He tutted a few times and started to look angry. I hoped that he would hurry up as the tourniquet was hurting. The veins throbbing with trapped blood. Pressure building up until my arm was near bursting point. Doctor Brown finally put the file down. He was not at all pleased.

“Why did you not inform me of your...,” he cleared his throat, “...history? If you had we wouldn’t have needed to waste time with that last blood test.” He glared at me over his glasses in the manner of a headmaster telling off a particularly unruly student for the umpteenth time.

“Problems? Which ones?” Did he mean the dose of mumps that I had a few years ago or the chicken pox? What else had I had in the past few years?

“Hmmm? A good question?” He sighed slowly. “For a start, you should have told me of your history of alcohol and substance abuse.”

“Eh? I’m not sure what you mean? I don’t have a history of that.”

“Must be the wrong records then? You born in 1970?”

“Yeah.”

“Next of kin is your mother Margaret Blair?”

“Yes.”

“Do you stay at number 11 Jacobs street?”

“Yes.”

“You had the kids illness of chicken pox and mumps when you were an adult?”

“Uh huh,” I confirmed.

“It’s your records all right. How did you get hepatitis? Injecting?”

“Erm, I...,” I was very confused, “I’ve never had hepatitis?”

“Oh, right? Then why does it say here..” he tapped on the file,”... that you nearly died in January 1998 from hepatitis B?”

“But I’ve...”

“I suppose that all those times you were admitted to hospital, during psychotic incidents brought on by LSD flashbacks, are just fiction?”

I was dumfounded!

“You’ve admitted using speed, cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin and glue. You claim to no longer use intravenous drugs since you overdosed last year. You also claim that you no longer take alcohol as you can’t keep it down. With your record, Mr Blair, I’m not surprised that you feel ill and tired all the time!”

“But, I don’t do drugs! None at all? Look there’s no marks on my arms!”

“Hmmm? I see?”

“I like a drink now and then, but doesn’t everyone?”

He suddenly stood up and pointed menacingly at the door. He looked as if at any moment he was going to blow his top. And then he blew his top.

“Get out, Mr Blair!” he shouted, “We don’t like *junkies* in this practice. Especially lying ones who live such a nice *clean* lifestyle that they need to get regularly tested for HIV! Three times this past year, I ask you, Mr Blair!”

“But, I...”

“OUT!!!”

For a second he looked as if he was going to hit me. Panicking, I rushed for the door and out into the corridor.”

“Don’t ever come back here again,” he said at my back and slammed the door shut.

I was stunned. My mind fizzed with confusion. I felt as though drunk. What on Earth had just happened? Passing though the waiting room, everyone stared at me. Even out here they must have heard the shouting? I removed the tourniquet and handed it silently to the attractive older woman in reception. She never said anything. Just took it off me and I left.

I wandered back to the college in a dream. I needed to talk to someone about this. Spider would do. Unfortunately, he didn’t turn up for his classes that afternoon. I’d seen him briefly in a corridor this morning. He looked rather drunk and was limping worse than usual. His rummy eyes looked straight through me just as if I wasn’t there.

“Lo, Spider,” I said, but he didn’t respond. Must have been having a bad day?
Now, so was I. Again.

Out of nothing more than habit, I checked my e-mail. Working on autopilot, I felt like Spider had looked. It was sometime before I was in an abstemious enough condition to read my mail.

Dear Tony,

Hi! It is a long time since I’ve heard from you. How is Ruth and Poppy? Thank you for your e-mail. It is a long time since I’ve done the Tarot. Normally you would not just draw five cards and try to interpret them. The position, the order, the amount and the orientation is very important and can make a big difference. Nevertheless, there are themes which link together in each of several interpretations. Both drawings are directly linked. Caution is indicated. There is a man of power. Educated and devious. Could be a politician or a teacher. I see chaos, fear, a long journey and a life in danger (maybe more than one). Something is coming to an end and something new is beginning. I have a bad feeling about this, but without a proper reading, it is not possible to elaborate further. Whatever is going on in your life, it could swing either way. Destinies are balanced at the moment, but they will not stay that way for long. Sorry that I cannot be of more help, but I am out of practice.

Yours

Lady Fliss



“Have you been to the doctors recently, Tony? It’s so important to look after your health, don’t you think?”

“A man’s life touches so many others. That was the message in ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’. How true. Touch me, Tony. Touch me. I’m reaching out for you, Tony. Has my life touched yours yet? It will. Don’t worry, it will...”

Darkness



The next day, I went to the police station and filed a complaint. Told them all about the threats, the deliveries, the letters, the phone calls and the blast-box attack. In response, they told me to write everything down that I’d just told them and sign it. It took ages to get it all down. They wanted dates and times. I had to estimate them. On completion, they added, that there was really not much that could be done other than pass the matter down to Scotland Yards Computer Misuse department who would get in touch as soon as possible. Suffice to say, I was *not* a happy little black duck.

For no particular reason, I imagined it would be weeks before I heard anything more about the matter. I was wrong. Early that evening, an Inspector Raeburn phoned. Scotland Yard had passed the matter on to him. He worked in far off Herefordshire, but was the closest available computer misuse officer. The report of my complaint had been faxed to him, but he needed more information and asked for my permission to record our phone conversation.

I went into it all in great vivid, lengthy detail. By the time I was finished, his ears must have been buzzing.

He was sympathetic and told me to continue as usual, keeping a diary of any out of the ordinary occurrences. I should keep copies of *all* e-mails (not just the ones from Darkness) and forward them to him. He pointed out, although Vinculum Net are legally obliged to archive copies of all mail that goes through their servers, if Darkness can hack into my medical records, he can probably get into the server and wipe all traces of

his harassment. I was advised me to change my bank accounts and credit cards etcetera since Darkness claimed to already have details of them. Apparently this sort of harassment is not unknown. Bank accounts and credit cards are common targets for this sort of malicious criminal.



The next day, (after being sent home from work due to a burst pipe) I overreacted (best to be on the safe side) and drew my life savings out of the bank, paid off my Visa account and applied for a MasterCard. Luckily, Ruth and myself did not have a joint bank account (though she insisted on examining - in great detail - my bank statement each month). She did not believe in joint accounts. Her money is *her* money. My money is *our* money. It would be over a week before I discovered that Darkness had managed to get me credit blacklisted. There would be no new credit card.

The almost £3,000 made quite a sizable package. I was too scared to walk home with all that money so for once I actually took my old Ford with me. It spluttered and complained all the way there and all the way back. It's old bones creaking from lack of use. I had to drive most of the time with the choke out.

I hide the money inside an old hot water bottle. I cut it open, put the plastic bag full of £50 notes in it and glued it shut again. I put the hot water bottle in my office waste paper basket hidden under the rubbish. Let any burglar find that! It was perfectly safe there as I rarely emptied the waste paper basket. Real rubbish went in the bin downstairs. Things that I might need again were left in the waste paper basket as long as possible. Ruth (if she was here) or Poppy would never dream of emptying it after all the fuss I'd made in the past about documents being thrown out by accident.

Beaky, as nosy as usual, followed me up stairs and keenly watched me hiding the money. I could just imagine a burglar breaking in and Beaky telling them to look in the waste paper basket.

"Shhsh," I told him, "Don't tell a soul. You saw nothing." I tapped the side of my nose a few times.

“Nothing,” he repeated solemnly, bobbing up and down a few times, “Busy doing nothing. Working the whole day through...” he sang and then burst into raucous cockatiel laughter.

“Laughing at your own jokes now, feather brain? Honestly Beaky, sometimes I worry that you’re not the full shilling.”

After the money was safely hidden, I tried to collect my e-mail. My dialler gave me the following message.

The Port Was Disconnected Due To Hardware Failure.

What this normally meant was that either the modem was not switched on, or the serial lead had come loose again. It could not be either of these faults as the modems power and DTR lights were on. Then I remembered. Before I had set out for the bank, I’d tried to make a phone call only to discover that the line was dead. I checked it again. It was still dead.

Rather than the loooong walk down the street (it had started to rain) to the phone box and report the fault, I checked for the obvious things, like loose sockets etc. I wondered if the junction box in the street had been vandalised again like it had a couple of months back when the phones were off for two whole days? It took seconds to check. Nope? Looks okay? Firmly sealed shut.

On the way back into the house, I spotted the problem. The phone line poked out of a small conduit near the front door. From there it went into a little hole to the side of the door. There was only about three inches of cable between the conduit and the hole. Someone had taken a pair of cutters and snipped through the cable. Vandals? I checked some of the nearby houses, but mine was the only line that had been cut.

It didn’t take much work to repair the fault, but by the time I’d finished, I was soaked to the skin and frozen to the bone. Should have put a coat on.

I changed out of the wet clothes and into my bath robe. A cup of steaming hot Bovril later and I was back in my office ready to dial up and check my e-mail. About a micro second away from clicking on the dial button, the phone rang. I hate it when that happens!

“Hi, dad. ‘s me. Guess what?”

It was Poppy. I just love her phone voice. Despite being so young and immature, she sounds very grown up and confident on the phone. Not so in real life.

“Your flu is better?” I said.

“No. Yes. Guess again. Go on? You’ll never guess!”

“Give me a clue?”

“Mum’s buying me my own computer!”

“That was a good clue. Won the lottery has she?”

Poppy had been nagging us for ages to get her own PC. I didn’t think that this was a good idea as it was difficult enough to keep an eye on her at the moment. There was no way she was going to get internet access as well.

“She got a bonus at work. I’m getting my own internet access too.”

“Why?”

“So I can go on the internet silly.”

“No, not why the internet. Why the bonus?”

“Oh! She got a new job at work. Was offered the choice of a change in job title or a bonus. From junior secretary to senior Personal Assistant. She took the money. Still does the PA job though.”

“Smart girl.”

“Means that I won’t be able to see you at the usual time on Saturday.”

“Why ever not?”

“Mum’s taking me into Glasgow to pick the computer out. But I’ll be seeing you as usual Saturday night. You remember that we’re all going out together?”

“Yes, pumpkin. Looking forward to it.”

“Don’t call me that. I hate that. Mum says you can wear some of her old clothes, but buy your own tights.”

Several weeks ago, we’d got tickets for the Burlington Amateur Dramatic Repertory’s production of the Rocky Horror Show. Poppy was dying to go as Molly Brown’s big brother Gary was playing the part of Frankenfurter. I’ve suspected that Poppy has had a crush on him for some time. Since, he is seventeen, I hope it is *not* reciprocated. The version which they were producing was the one with full audience participation. Any male adult who came to the show in the spirit of the event - which

presumably meant in drag - got a free pint of lager at the interval. With an offer like that, how could I refuse?

“Okay. What’s wrong with getting a computer at Curries? They’re doing a special at the moment. A 1.2 gigahertz Athlon package with printer, digi cam and loads of software for £699.”

“It’s too dear. She will only go up to £500,”

“You can still get a good machine for that, Poppy.”

“I know! Ain’t it great!”

“Yeah, I didn’t think I’d see the day when your mother would encourage you using a computer.”

“She says that I’ll need one when I go to high school. Besides, I pointed out that if I had my own wee computer then I wouldn’t have to go over and use yours. She thought that was a great idea!”

I can see how that idea would appeal to her.

“Yous been arguing again?” she said.

“A bit,” I sighed.

“Don’t worry. I’ll still be over just as often as usual.”

“Glad to hear it Poppy.”

“After all, I’ll need to see what new software you’ve been buying. You got the new Quake clone yet?”

“Which one?”

“Return To RET.”

“Yes. Had it ages. Didn’t tell you about it ‘cause I thought you didn’t like games much.”

“Yeah. Normally, I don’t, but I was reading about it in PC Format and it looks gemmy!”

“I’ve told you before, don’t waste your money on magazines when you can read my copies for free.”

“But, you don’t get PC Format, dad?”

“I’ve just started,” I lied.

“Oh, that’s good, dad. Anyway, I better go. Just thought you’d be interested. Was dying to tell you.”

“Yeah, great news hen. You deserve it.”

“Catch ya later then, dad.”

“Kay. Lots of love, Poppy.”

“See ya. Wouldn’t wanna be ya,” she giggled and hung up.

I clicked on the dial button and seconds later logged onto Vinculum Net.

*“Hi Tony. I finally managed up to Scotland yesterday. Couldn’t come over to see U as I was 2 busy. I saw Edinburgh Castle, but didn’t stay long. Glasgow Green was a mess. Last time I was in Glasgow was when I was at the Garden Festival. Now, that *was* a long time ago. Oh, I tell I lie! The last time was a visit to the Festival Of Wheels. Doesn’t Scotland have a lot of festivals? I sometimes go to the Edinburgh Festival. Whilst I was up, I had a quick look at the Art Galleries and a couple of museums. All in all, it was a very busy day. I even had time for a quick trip up to Loch Ness. Didn’t see the monster though. Oh, nearly forgot, while I was up I met your wife Ruth. Nice lady! I’m not too sure, but I think she enjoyed it when I raped her.”*

Darkness

To say that I was startled was the understatement of the year. After I got over the initial shock, I realised that this had to be a lie. If Ruth had been raped yesterday, Poppy would have noticed something wrong with her and told me. You just can’t hide stuff like that. Nevertheless, I was still worried and decided to phone her just in case.

“Hi again, dad.”

“Is your mother there. Can I speak to her?”

“Sure.”

A few moments later, Ruth came to the phone.

“Hi Tony. What can I do for you?”

She sounded in a very good mood. Must have been the bonus?

“Just phoning to see if you are okay?”

“Fine. You don’t normally phone out of the blue?”

“I just had a funny feeling that something was up.”

“Aw, that’s sweet! No, I’m fine. In fact, better than fine. Got a sizable bonus today!”

“I know, Poppy just told me. Who did you have to sleep with to get that?”

“Just all the office staff. Even the New Deal teenagers.”

“And I thought you were just mothering them, Mrs Robinson?”

“I’m no that auld yet,” she laughed.

“You’re only as old as the man you feel,” I said.

“I’m not feeling any men these days.”

“Oh, Mum!” Poppy complained in the background.

“He, he! Busted, Ruth!”

“As usual. Why do I always get caught out? Oh, that reminds me. Remember those self defence classes that you said were a waste of time?”

“Yeah?”

“Well they have worked out. Last night I met a crazy man.”

“Oh?”

“Didn’t get a good look at him. The street lights were all busted again. Was walking home from overtime, when he stopped me and asked for a light. I told him that I didn’t smoke and he thanked me anyway. I was about to walk on when he grabbed my arm and says *‘I’m really sorry, but I’m going to have to rape you. I don’t want to, but I have no other choice. It’s nothing personal’*. He was very polite.”

“Oh? What did you do?” I suddenly felt sick and had that sense of unreality again.

“Broke his grip and kicked him the balls.”

“Good girl!”

“He went down like a sack of potatoes and started whimpering.”

“I’m not surprised,” I said with a great sense of relief. What a woman, eh?

“As he lay there trying to curl up into a ball, I said to him, *‘That’s not personal either.’*”

It was a long time before I stopped laughing. This looked too much of a coincidence to be just a coincidence. This Darkness guy was an real out and out

psycho. Luckily, Ruth was able for him. The question was, was I? He must have sent the e-mail before he tried to accost Ruth. Maybe he had even sent it from home by preset timer whilst he was still in Scotland? Lots of software can do that.

Why couldn't my stalker live in the USA? That would stop him from popping *up* to Scotland whenever he felt like it. *Up* to Scotland? Just because he'd said '*...up to...*' in a couple of e-mails and had a London accent, it didn't necessarily mean that he lived in London? Maybe he was living up here and trying to hide his location? He could be living right here in Burlington? Maybe in this very street? Maybe next door?

Now this *was* paranoia! It wasn't even logical. Just because Darkness read the postings in alt.ph.uk didn't even mean he had to be in the UK. After all, it was not a local newsgroup, but part of *UseNet*. As such, it could be accessed by *anyone* in the entire world. Nevertheless, It was highly unlikely that Darkness lived within hundreds of miles of me. Considering the way that the internet worked, it was an unfortunate coincidence that he was even living on the same land mass. There was no chance that we could be living in the same town. Was there? Was there? Bloody hell!

After my call to Ruth, I phoned Inspector Raeburn's station to keep him up to date. He was not there so I tried his mobile number. He had given it making me promise to phone day or night if there were any major developments. Inspector Raeburn took it all very seriously. He told me to go to the nearest pet shop and get the thickest dog chain I could lay my hands on. If when I was out and about, I carried a big dog lead, any potential attacker might assume that there was a big dog, just out of sight, to go with it. If this didn't put him off, I could always hit him with the chain. I voiced the opinion that I could get into trouble if caught walking about the streets with what was technically an offensive weapon. The good Inspector said that if I was questioned about the lead not to say that it was for protection. Tell them that my dog had recently died and that I had the dog lead on me by force of habit. Apparently there wasn't a policeman alive that could prove otherwise or do anything about it other than confiscate the dog lead. That is very nice! A police Inspector encouraging me to carry an offensive weapon? I ask you? Nevertheless, I decided to do just that. I didn't need to buy one as I still had Butch's old collar and lead. I don't throw anything away if I can help it. On reflection, if I have to go out at night, in future I'll start taking the car.

*“Your wife ain’t so nice, Tony. The bitch got lucky. I underestimated her, that’s all. I will *not* make that mistake again. I hope you’re not laughing at me, Tony? No one laughs at me. I do bad things when I get laughed at. Things that I hope not to have to do, but I’ll do them. I have done in the past and will do again. Up until now, this was just you, Tony. But now Ruth needs to be taught respect too.”*

“By the way, that is a nice looking little daughter that you have. So attractive. At that age, they care so much about their looks. Don’t you find?”

Darkness

Chapter Five

Dude Looks Like A Lady

“I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice...”

Mary Shelley

“How do I look?” I said.

“Like a ten dollar hooker,” said Ruth, “Trust you to go over the top as usual.”

“You look really funny, dad,” giggled Poppy.

I was wearing a blue mini dress (I didn’t have the figure for it), with red lacy stockings (or the legs for it) and a wig with long blond pigtails. I had considered high heels, but Ruth’s wouldn’t fit me and I wasn’t about to buy a pair just so I could get a free pint. Instead, I wore a pair of Doc Martin’s. Thought that the contrast might cause a laugh or two. There wasn’t anywhere to put my wallet and keys so they went into a small girly looking neck bag that I pinched off Poppy.

“More like ridiculous,” said Ruth sniggering, “Make that a five dollar hooker!”

The dress was very uncomfortable and felt as if it might fall down at any moment, but the stockings were surprising comfy. Don’t know why women moan about them so much? If I was a woman, I’d wear them all the time.

Compared to me, Ruth was kinda dull. A smart grey trouser suit with black sling-backs. In fact pretty boring looking. Despite this, I was very happy to see her and had rude (but pleasant) thoughts almost immediately.

“Here,” I said to Poppy, handing over my digital camera.

“Surely you don’t want to be photographed like that?” said Ruth.

“Yeah. Will look good on the website.”

“Just ignore her dad. You look lovely!”

I grabbed Ruth and gave her a big kiss whilst Poppy snapped a couple of pictures.

“Oh, look,” Ruth sniggered, “You’ve smudged your lipstick!”

“Damn!” I touched up my lippy in the mirror and Poppy took another picture.

“I’m not keeping that one,” I complained.

“I think it is just what your students need to see. The real you,” smirked Ruth.

“Maybe, I should put up *thee* picture on the website too?”

“*Thee* picture?” said Ruth.

“Yes, *thee* picture!”

“Oh, *thee* picture! Don’t you even think about it!”

“What picture?” said Poppy.

“Never you mind, Poppy!”

“When you were a little girl, your mother...” I started.

“Tony! No!” Ruth put her hand over my mouth. We struggled about giggling. I got one of Ruth’s fingers free and tried to speak. Ruth shrieked and tried to get her other hand over the gap.

“Went topless on Blackpool beach.”

“Is this true, mother?” said Poppy very seriously. It is a bad sign when she uses the words, *father*’ or *mother*’. Means she doesn’t approve of something or other.

“Erm, sort of,” Ruth said coyly.

“Yeah,” I laughed, “Sort of...”

Ruth and I suddenly started to laugh uncontrollable.

“What you mean ‘sort of’?”

“Nothing!” we both exclaimed.

Poppy glared for a moment, bit her lip and declared that grownups were disgusting which started us laughing again.

“Yes, they are!” I agreed with tears flowing down my cheeks.

“Com’on. We’re gonna be late,” Poppy stamped open the front door and out into the dark night.

“Tony.” whispered Ruth and twanged my suspender belt.

“Ouch,” I gave an exaggerated tee-hee.

Yeah, I know. If this is how we get on when our marriage is going through a bad patch, how do we get on when things are going well? Actually, nothing like as well as this. Ain't relationships strange? Ain't they wonderful?



I drove the three of us out to the Burlington Theatre. Despite recent events, I was in as good a mood as the girls. When Britany's latest hit came on the radio, we all sang along. Once there, I was pleased to see that I was not the only male in drag. I had been a bit worried that we'd get there only to find out that it was not in fact the audience participation version that was playing and I'd stick out like a sore thumb. Most of the other men looked like me. Just a guy in a dress, but a few of them had gone the full hog with heavy makeup and were difficult to tell from real (if tarty looking) women. Some of the guys obviously just didn't care. Large fat men with moustaches playing it for laughs. One guy was dressed up as a spitting image of Freddie Mercury, though I haven't a clue what this has to do with the Rocky Horror Show. With all these show offs, the real women present (and there was a lot of them) looked dowdy by comparison.

As is the nature of the beast, the show started ten minutes late. Despite the rather dull rendition of the opening number, the whole thing turned out to be rather good. The singing was excellent and the dialogue had been converted to Glasgow patter. I don't know what the original script was like, but there seemed to be a lot of adlibbing and strong language that was not in the TV version. I did lots of laughing. So did poppy. Ruth did not seem very happy at all. At the interval, she demanded that I take her and Poppy home.

"Why? You knew what it was going to be like before you came?"

"It is *not* appropriate material for a twelve year old."

"But, Poppy's already seen it on telly?"

"It didn't have all that swearing in it."

"If you don't like it, you go home then. Leave Poppy with me. She's enjoying it."

"Yes, mum. It's so funny," Poppy poked her penny's worth in, "You get worse swearing than that at school."

“Oh, do you? Maybe, I should be having a word or two with the headmaster?”

“Aw, mum!”

She snatched Poppy’s hand and led her off toward the nearby public phone.

“We’re going to get a taxi, Tony. Enjoy your free pint.”

“I want to stay with dad!”

“Shut up. You coming home with me!”

“But, I always stay with dad on a Saturday night?”

“Not, this week your not. Shut up ‘till I phone the taxi. Anyway, you’ve got that new computer at home to be testing.”

There really wasn’t any point in arguing. I’d known Ruth for too long not to realize that her mind was set in concrete. This inflexible character trait was a personal dislike of mine. It had manifested its self even back in high school in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Think it’s a family trait. Her mother is far worse. The first time she took me home to meet her parents, her old bat of a mother took an instant unexplained dislike to me. She disliked me even more when a few years later, I made Ruth pregnant. Thought I’d seen the last of the old bag when she moved back to Scotland. Recently, Ruth had began to behave more and more like her awful mother. Come to think of it, she was generally pretty moody these days and her breasts seemed to be getting bigger. You don’t suppose? Naa...

I wandered into the bar and got my free pint which was quickly followed by a second (not free) pint. Even although I gulped the lager down, I still managed to be late for the second part of the show which I enjoyed even more than the first half. Afterwards, I decided to have another pint before driving home. Is it okay to drink two pints and still be legally allowed to drive? I think it is. I had another one and a couple of vodkas. No one would never know. I was enjoying myself that much (and making new friends) that I decided to make a night of it. I really needed to unwind. After all, I could always leave my car in the car park and get a taxi home.

The bar is rather old worldly and rather nice. You can see hundred year old oak beams that hold the ceiling up. The few times that I’ve been in this bar, it always seems very friendly. That night, the small bar room was packed out. I spotted one of our more mature college students and went over to say hello. Wearing a lemon evening dress, he sported a large pair of unrealistic plastic breasts and a massive wig that would have

ruined a lesser mortal. He was in one of our evening I.T classes. I did not normally teach this, but had stood in on four or five occasions when the regular tutor couldn't make it.

"Hi, James," I said.

"Hello, darling," he minced, "How do you know my name?"

"I remember you from class. How are you getting on with your course?"

"Course? What course?"

"Your evening classes. It's me, Tony. Tony Blair."

"Tony Blair? Like the Prime Minister?"

"Yeah."

"Whatever. I don't do evening classes and I would have remembered a name like that deary."

"But you are always talking to me? Remember last month when you were telling me about the minor surgery you were about to have to a large boil on your backside?"

"Shssh! Not so loud," he looked about nervously, "I did have such a problem, but I still don't know you from Adam ducky. Do you normally wear a dress?"

"No, I teach you hardware maintenance when your tutor Mary Smyth is off."

"I know Mary well, but I've never seen you in my life and I don't go to evening classes. If you'll excuse me lover boy, I'm wanted elsewhere."

With that, he minced off into the crowd at the bar. As they say in Penny Lane, very strange.

All too soon, it was closing time. I still felt sober so I decided to chance it and drive home. First a quick trip to the gents (which was full of men in drag) and then out into the car park where the local constabulary were waiting in their car in the shadows for idiots like me. They did not make themselves known straight away. First they watched me stagger across the car park singing enthusiastically and doing actions.

"Am just a sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania..."

Opening the car, I got in, slid the key into the ignition (I had problems getting it in the dark keyhole) and turned the engine on. I groaned when a uniformed policeman and policewoman appeared out of the shadows and walked slowly over. The policeman tapped on the drivers window with a torch. I wound the window down.

"Hi," I slurred, "I've just been to the theatre."

“We guessed.”

“Great show.”

“You been drinking Sir?”

“A wee bit. Only had a couple of pints.”

“Then you won’t mind blowing into this bag then?” He took a breathalyser bag out of his pocket.

“Why? Are your chips too hot?” I laughed heartily.

“Sir?”

“A joke,” I explained, “Thought yous guys used electronic breathalysers these days?”

“We do, but I’ve no hygiene mouth pieces left. It’s been a busy night,” he said gesturing with the bag, “Please blow into here, Sir.”

“Okay. You’re wasting your time though. Won’t change the crystals green. Not had enough to drink.” I took the bag and stuck the nozzle in my mouth.

“One long blow if you please, Sir.”

I grunted agreement and nodded my head. With difficulty, I filled the bag with my beery breath and passed it back.

“See?” I said.

He examined it for ages and showed it to the policewoman.

“Can I see your driving licence please Sir?”

“Sure.”

I reached into my pocket for my wallet. Except that there wasn’t any pockets. The wallet was in Poppy’s bag which hung about my neck. Except that Poppy’s neck bag wasn’t there. I had had trouble with it that last time I was in the gents and took it off. Unless it had been stolen, it was still sitting on top of the hot air hand drier. I explained this to the officers.

“I see,” he said, “Can I have your name and address?”

“Tony Blair. I stay in Jacob Street. Number eleven.”

“Tony Blair, eh? You any identification at all?”

“It is all in my wallet. I don’t think they will have locked up yet. You can ask them to look for it in the bar.”

He turned to the police women who had still not said a word. "Keep an eye on him 'till I check the computer."

"Okay," she answered nervously. Must be a rookie? Dirty Harry walked a short bit away and spoke quietly into his walky-talky.

"You know, I've always had a thing for women in uniform," I told the policewoman who was looking uncomfortable, "You know it won't hurt your face to smile once and a while. Bet you've got a really nice smile. How do you become a copper anyway? I'd really like to be one. Fed up with my job."

"Just like any other profession. Ask for an application form and hope for an interview."

"They still send you down to Hendon?"

"Yes."

Dirty Harry came back over, "There is a Tony Blair living at that address," he told the rookie, "He's got a record as long as your arm for paedophilia related incidents. Just got out of a seven stretch a few months back." Then to me, "Get out of the car arsehole! Yer nicked!"

"Hey, hold on an minute! You've made a mistake. I've never been in jail."

"Out the car!"

I got out of the car complaining all the while. The alcohol buzzing about my blood stream took that moment to make its self known. I wobbled unsteadily and put a hand on Dirty Harry's shoulder to steady myself.

"You witnessed that Brenda?"

"Yes," said Brenda.

"Assaulting a police officer."

"Look, this is getting stupid!" I exclaimed

He removed his truncheon from his belt - it was one of those telescopic ones with a side extension - and without warning hit me hard across the spine. I gave a yell of pain and collapsed into a nearby muddy puddle. Hurting both wrists as I feebly tried to stop my head crunching into the asphalt. My wig fell off. Just wait until Ruth sees the mess of her dress.

"We, don't like your sort mister!" he said and spat in my face. The nice Brenda spat on me too. After being roughly handcuffed with my hands American style behind

my back, I was dragged even more roughly to the police car and bundled in the back. Several times, I complained that they were making a big mistake. Brenda slapped me hard in the face and told me to, "Shut up or else!" I disobeyed the law of gravity and shat up.

By the time we got to the cop shop, the pain in my spine had ebbed to a warm spark which re-ignited with a vengeance when I was pulled from the car.

The desk sergeant was the same one who had dealt with me when I'd been lifted for trespassing.

"I would like to report police brutality!"

"Oh, right?"

"He hit me with his stick!"

"How frightfully awful for you. Shut up and give me your name and address."

"Shut up and give you my name? How can I do that?"

"A smart arse?" he sighed.

"Tony Blair."

"Tony, Blair? I don't remember the face or the dress, but I remember the name. Why didn't you get any ID like I told you?"

"I did. But, I left it in the toilet at the bar."

"You were in a bar dressed like that? What was it, an ugly transvestite club?"

"I was at the Rocky Horror show."

"Hmmm? Hold on a mo while I check your record."

He turned to a nearby terminal, the screen of which was hidden from view and type in my details. A short time later, his eyebrows stood up and he began to look unhappy.

"You're had an eventful life, son. A bit of a bad lad, eh? Well we know how to deal with your sort in here," then to another officer, "Put him in number six, Bobby"

"No! Wait? You've made a mistake. I've never done anything in my life. Don't you remember that time I was up here for trespassing on that building site? You remember? You checked my record and it was clean."

"Nope."

"But, you *must* remember!"

"Shut the fuck up! Don't put him in number six, Bobby. I've changed my mind. Put him in number five."

“But that’s overcrowded as it is? Three of McClumfer’s mob are in there. You know what they’re like?”

“Take a look at his record.”

Bobby, took a look at my record.

“Oh!” he said.

“Warn the McClumfer boys that they better look after him.”

“Okay sarge,” he grinned, “What about the blood and urine tests?”

“What about them?”

“Thought that the breath analyser was buggered.”

“It is.”

“So we’ll need a blood or urine sample instead.”

Oh, no! Not another dirty big needle...

“Och, the McClumfer’s ‘ill do them fur us,” smirked the desk sergeant.

“Yeah,” Bobby smirked back.

Bobby took my handcuffs off and told me to remove my watch, belt, shoes and personal positions which he placed in a large brown paper bag. After searching me, he led me off to the cells.

“At least let me phone my wife?”

“No chance, pal.”

“I know my rights. You have to let me make a phone call!”

“You been watching too many movies, pal. Your sort don’t have any rights.”

With that, he opened the door to the cell and pushed me in.

“Look after this one lads. He likes doing things to wee lassies and boys, if you know what I mean. If the rest of the lads find out they might do something stupid. It’s up to yous to keep an eye on him.” With that, he slammed and locked the cell door behind me.

The atmosphere in the small room was extremely oppressive. The silent tension in the air contrasted well with the heat and the smell of urine. The McClumfer boys just sat and stared at me. The three of them were big lads with crew cuts and tattoos. I try not to judge people by their appearances - you should see some of the students at the college - but these guys looked every inch trouble. I sat as far away from them as I

could. I was terrified. After a long uncomfortable silence, one of them spoke. He had a small, but vivid, scar on one cheek and a cold sore on the other.

“Is that true?” asked scarred cold sore.

I was almost disappointed when his voice sounded normal. I couldn’t for the life of me imagine what he was referring to. With difficulty, I croaked a reply.

“Is what true?”

“What he said? You like kiddies?”

“Ah, hate poof’s.” Growled one of the others.

“Do, you?” repeated scarred cold sore.

“Er, no? Course not! I’m married. I’ve got a daughter.”

“Maist poof’s are married,” said growler.

“Thought as much. The pigs just want us to do their dirty work for them.”

“I think we should cut his balls off anyway. Just in case?” said the third one. He wore a tee-shirt with the letters FTP on it. Somehow, I don’t think that that stood for File Transfer Protocol. It was sex with the Pope again.

“Ah, *hate* poof’s,” said growler.

“Aw, guys! Leave him alone. Kin ya no see he’s shittin’ himself as it is,” said scarred cold sore.

“But, he looks like a poof?” said growler.

“So day you ya big numpty. Din’t he, Murphy?”

“Aye,” agreed FTP, “A big poofy shite!”

The atmosphere in the cell thinned a little as they started to argue good naturedly amongst themselves. Maybe, I was going to be okay? My stress levels, which had previously been on 100%, slid down to a more manageable 99%. They asked me a few predictable questions, such as what was I in for and why was I wearing a dress? After a while, they got bored with me and shut up. I curled up and tried to get some sleep.



An unknown time later, I was kicked rudely awake. Instinctively, I tried to yell, but couldn’t. Something foul tasting had been stuffed into my mouth. My head was covered by something thick and woolly. Seconds after this realisation, I was kicked in

the face. I felt something crack and break. Strangely enough, all I could think off while the feet and clubs were raining down on me, was that the feet were booted and the blows from the clubs felt exactly like the one that Dirty Harry had delivered to my spine. What had happened to my cell mates? Who was giving me this kicking?

Someone kicked me hard between the legs. I tried to scream and vomit at the same time. Neither of them could get out of my blocked mouth. They tried to come out of my nose. I thrashed about with chest heaving and my choking lungs burning for air. Vomit clogged my nose shut. Pressure made my eyes feel as if they were going to pop out. Within the darkness, points of light were twinkling and popping. Seeing stars? I thought that was just an expression?

The pain and terror went on and on and on. And then, I was out of fight. None left. Couldn't see the point. I went limp. The blows went on, but I could no longer feel any pain. No energy left to breath anymore. I gave up and slid into a dark warm (safe) place. My last coherent thought was the realisation that throughout this whole business, not a single word had been spoken. The only sounds had been from me. Then there was a great big nothing...

A lonely velvety black meaninglessness. A silent place. An eternal place. A dead place. No, not quite dead. A last distant thought filled the void. Now that I was dead, who would look after Beaky?



An ambulance. A policeman sitting opposite looking worried. Voices? Talking voices. I can't understand what is being said? Sounds *too* loud. Colours *too* bright. A universe manufactured from pain and confusion. Where the hell am I? The last thing I remember was sitting in the theatre bar sinking my umpteenth pint of lager. I try to sit up. Can't? Try to talk. Couldn't? My mouth is numb yet I was aware that my lips were swollen to bursting point. There is blood on the policeman's trousers. My tongue tells me that some of my teeth are missing. I manage to give a feeble cough and void rather a lot of tangy red stuff. I start to choke again.



Hawkeye Pierce, the doctor from MASH, was trying to get me to sign something? I can't hold the pen and can't remember how to work it anyway. A large fat lady in some sort of a uniform is sticking a big needle in my arm. Despite my world of pain, I feel every inch of the needle sinking in and in and in. Inch by slow inch. Foot after foot. Mile after mile. Please. Don't? I start to cry.

"His BP is going up and down like a yo-yo," said Hawkeye. The large fat lady in a uniform had disappeared and as if by magic a blood pressure thingamyjig had appeared round my arm.

"I'm not waiting for the x-rays. He needs it now." Hawkeye was holding an impossibly thin syringe in one hand whilst filing it from an equally small phial held in the other.

With no perceptible passage of time, I'm in another place. A man is removing his gloved finger from my back passage. I don't care. I am drunk. Confused. What the hell is causing this dreadful dream?

"No sign of prostrate rupture or inflammation. Bowel curves to the left so we can go in on the right."

"Have to be a big cut."

"Hmm?"

"Could be anything. Liver. Pancreas. Stomach. Or all of them. He was moving about too much to get a clear x-ray."

"He been prepped?"

"Yeah."

Another reality jump. Somewhere else. A mask over my face and a nearby hissing. Something going pip, pip, pip?

"He's nice and red. Should be going under any moment now..."

Silence and darkness. That rich velvety darkness. So comfortable. No more pain. I can stay here forever...

Infinity...

Passes...

So...

Slowly...

Then...

Voices. Quiet. Mumbling. Concerned. Another hissing sound? Something is tickling my right arm? Stop it. I hate that. Go away. Leave me alone!

I need a drink. Get me a drink. Never been this thirsty before? This dark dream is too hot. I should bite my fingers, that would wake me? No, it may only be a dream, but people sleep walking can hurt themselves. I could wake and find I'd bitten my fingers off?

Skin crawls. Tickles. Now, it hurts. There's something wrong with my face? Try to touch it. Still can't move. Try to speak. Feels as if I've no throat or tongue. Try harder. Mouth doesn't work? Can't feel it at all. Are my eyes open or closed?

Perhaps this thick jelly of burning sweat is really just hot water? I'm drowning in thick hot water. Help me. Again. Help me. Please? Breath out and swim in the direction of the bubbles. I'm drowning and dying of thirst?

Light. I open my eyes. Blobby figures float close by. Why can't I see them properly? Am I alive?

With a super human effort I twitch my arm. Someone is holding it? Stroking it. Stop it. I told you, I hate that.

"Look he moved. His eyes are open!"

My mind clears momentarily.

Where am I? Why can't I speak? Try. Try. Try? Super human effort to move my mouth. Again. Nothing. Again. Nothing? Give up. I'm not even breathing. Its a dream. Has to be?

Something's on my face! What's on my face? Take it off my face.

"Can you hear me?"

I tried to nod, but can't. I give a thumbs up sign. Happy sounds. People sounding relieved. Let me wake up. Don't like this dream. Need to sit up. What's that hissing?

I turn my right hand palm upwards and slowly lifted the fingers until they were at ninety degrees to my palm. Sit up. Sit me up?

"What's he trying to do?"

"Sit up. He wants to sit up. It that it? Do you want to sit up?"

Thumb up.

"He's going to be all right! He understands us."

"You can't sit up yet, Tony You've been very ill. I'll get you another pillow."

I do a mime of someone writing. They get it first time. Someone gives me a clipboard with paper on it. I'm too weak to hold it. Someone puts something in my hand and holds it there; pressing it onto the clipboard. Feels hexagonal in cross section. Must be a pen. An old Bic? Yes. I can feel the air hole half way down its length. Can't see well enough to write, but I try and try and try. Eventually they decipher it.

WATER

"You can't have a drink. You've had an operation."

But, I need water? So tired and thirsty. Need more sleep. Can I have a drink first?

Again, blackness.

No dreaming.

Long time....

Long, long time...



The operation scar was very large. It looked like two bits of raw steak that had been sewn together. To the left and right were holes in my abdomen through which large tubular drains carried the poisonous fluids out of my body. There were about six drips going into a network of taps which went into my left arm and - by way of a long internal tube - more than a foot into the blood vessel. The electrocardiograph heart machine worked through three pads stuck onto my chest. A probe was clipped about my right index finger. It shone a light onto the skin and measured the amount of redness that bounced back. With this information, it could work out if there was enough oxygen reaching my blood stream from the oxygen mask that I was wearing. On top of all that, a urinal catheter was also in position. Just as well. It would be a long time before I could go to the toilet again.

My pancreas and my appendix had been ruptured. The latter was patched up and the former removed.

In the bowel is a valve which stops the excrement from coming up from the intestines and into the stomach. This valve had jammed open and my stomach was full of faecal

matter. A large tube had been fed down my nose to drain the rubbish out of my stomach. In the past, I've been accused of eating a load of crap, but this was ridiculous.

In order to deal with these things they had opened me up from my groin to the bottom of my ribs. On top of this, I had lost three teeth, broken two ribs, cracked my spine in two places, broke an ankle and toe (same foot). Most of my face was extremely swollen, I had difficulty seeing out of my left eye and my body was covered from head to toe in large ugly bruises.

I had the most raging thirst, but they would not let me drink anything at all. The painkillers had a strange effect on me. Most of the time, I was floating. My mind was never clear for more than a few minutes at a time. I was very emotional and my sense of time was completely mucked up. Another side-effect was extreme paranoia. Every doctor, nurse and physiotherapist who visited me were *not* what they seemed. They were all Darkness and intended doing bad things to me. The oxygen mask was feeding me poison. The fan that they used to lower my temperature was a torture device. There was nothing wrong with my temperature. It could not have been high. I was freezing. On several occasions I voiced my suspicions extremely loud also mentioning matter-of-factly that they were all illegitimate copulating female genitalia.

One night I spent what seemed like hours begging for a drink. When the nurse explained for the hundredth time, why I could not have one, I burst out crying. In a moment's weakness, the nurse (think he was called Raymond) gave me an ice cube to suck. Not that I was allowed to suck it directly. That would have been too easy. I had to suck it through gauze. After that, I regularly begged for ice cubes. They would not give me any more than one a day. Instead they allowed me up to five a day of these awful things that looked like giant Q-tips. They were supposed to be lemon flavoured, but to me seemed like vinegar. They did help a little bit, but not as much as the ice cubes. On the day in which I was moved out of the ICU, I was finally given a drink of water. It was only twenty-five millilitres and they watched me closely to make sure that I didn't drink it too quick. It was nectar of the Gods.

Whilst on the operating table, for a long while it was touch and go. Doing their best to patch me together, the operating team did not think that I would survive. When I *did* survive, they thought that I would be a vegetable for the rest of my presumably short life. It surprised everyone when I did *not* turn out to be a vegetable. Except me. It didn't surprise

me at all. In that dark lonely infinity, I had made up my mind to do something. So determined was I to do this thing that death would have been a great inconvenience. When Death came for me, I did like Flash Gordon and told him to, '*Zark Off!*' Another *Jump On Zero* decision. A single minded purpose. I was going to hunt Darkness down.



Ruth and Poppy visited me regularly whilst I was in the intensive care unit. When the nurses finally moved me into an normal ward, Spider eventually turned up. He was wearing a Spice Girls tee-shirt - Beaky would have liked it - and had had a couple of metal rings put in an eyebrow. I gave him a lecture on body piercing and tattoos. After being ignored for ages, I decided to change the subject and reiterated at length about my new purpose in life.

"This is some heavy shit, Tony," he said thoughtfully.

"I know," I said.

"You'll have to get yer self better first," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Gonnie take a long time," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Might not be possible," he said.

"I know," I said.

"Might have to kill him," he said.

"I know," I said.

Interlude In Darkness Three

I must be careful of this new found power. It would be so easy to lose track of where I am going or get there too late. I will be with Judy, but have so much work to do before the reunion. So often I decide that enough is enough and make foolish plans of ending it sooner. Such confusion. Such sadness. Such tiredness.

My grandfathers old straight backed razor would willingly help out. It is not a happy blade. Decade after decade of scraping stubble when all it wants to do is cut, spill and drink. The absorption of life is what the blade dreams of. I know. It talks. I listen. A weak whisper gaining momentum. Be patient my friend. You will soon indulge. Loosen your passions. Your nourishment. Your destiny. Your obsession.

An inexorable force is replaced into this world. Androgynous conception. Silent gestation. Violent delivery. A birthright of rape. A birthright of murder. A birthright of correction.

I am so disappointed in the fleeting nature of satisfaction achieved by the correction of Rupert Hollingsworth. At the time so sweet. Now barren of all emotion except the self loathing. That I am become this power, yet weaken my spirit. I fear I may be losing my mind.

There are increasing moments of Darkness in my memory. Dead zones of continuity. I went into the freezer yesterday looking for a chicken that I knew was there. It could not be found. This morning, whilst taking out the rubbish, I found its remains. I find this quite disturbing. I've noticed small missing moments, but nothing this big before. Is it that the moments are missing or did they never happen at all? Am I cracking up or is reality?

Since I moved into this new home, I am uncomfortable. There are whispers and movements beyond my perceptions. Fleeting enough to barely caress the subconscious. Yet near enough the veil of reality as to demand my attention.

*Looking is too late. Listening is not enough. Something dark dwells with me.
Watching. Waiting. Wondering. Will it make itself know? Will our agendas match? I
do hope so. I hope so very much. I need a colleague. I need a friend. I need a critic...*

Chapter Six

Scent Of A Woman

*“Koko took a vast interest in the new arrival.
He would hop round it and peer at it with
his head on one side...”*

H. de Vere Stacpoole

Whilst still in hospital, Inspector Raeburn came to see me. He was an unassuming figure, who looked too short to be in the police force. Pretty ordinary looking in plain clothes with no particularly distinguishing features. Kinda boring. I guess that he was a whisker away from his fortieth birthday. He had an odd accent. Part Londoner. Part something else. I don't know what it was, but there was a nice manner about him. I took an instant liking to him.

“According to the logs, you started a fight with your three cell mates by boasting about your criminal past. To wit, your attraction towards children and how so many times you had not been caught.”

“Total rubbish! You can ask them. It was your lot who done it!”

“I did. They made statements corroborating the custody logs.”

“I don't have a criminal past. And whoever gave me the doing had on bloody great boots and used clubs. Where would my cells mates get those from in the middle of the night?”

“I checked your criminal record. The details *appear* quite genuine. You *are* a habitual paedophile with loads of convictions.”

“I don't have a fucking record! It's all been fucking made up!”

He raised a hand and tutt, tutted. “Just hold on a moment. Do you realise just what is involved in doctoring a criminal record?”

“No. I don't imagine that it would be that easy.” I growled.

“Notice, I said *appear*. That is the keyword. It is possible to doctor the crime computer database so it would appear that someone had a false criminal record, but is not possible to fake all the court records, arrest logs or prison records. If you’ve been paying income tax or receiving unemployment benefit over the periods when you were allegedly in prison then it’s concrete evidence that your record has been tampered with.”

“I’ve been in constant employment for nearly five years.”

“That’s good ‘cause your record states that you just got out of Dartmoor after serving nearly seven years for sex offences toward several children. I’ll be collecting statements relating to that period from your family, friends and employers as well as looking up old court records etcetera. It’ll probably take rather a long time.”

“I’ve plenty of time. Just as long as you prove I’m innocent and get my name cleared.”

“I know that this seems a bit of a silly question, but I am officially asking you if you intend taking these allegations against the police further?”

“Intending taking them further?” I laughed incredulously. “Damn fucking right I do! The bastards nearly killed me!”

The good inspector stood there in silence whilst I shouted vitriol and called the metropolitan police every colourful thing that I could think of. After much repetition and periodic nervous laughter, I wound down into a silence.

“I’ll start the ball rolling,” said inspector Raeburn, “There is already an internal investigation underway. With that ongoing, a public enquiry couldn’t start for a long while. When it does, it may take a very long time to conduct.”

“Protecting their own?” I spat.

“Something like that. A team will be sent out to interview you shortly.”

“I’ve already been interviewed.”

“Yes. But, that was off the record.”

“Off the record? Attempted murder? What the hell needs to be done before it gets put *on* the record?”

“Can you please try to calm down, sir?”

“Calm down? Calm down? I can...” And I suddenly felt the fight drain out of me. “I can try. I’ll try...” As I trailed off into silence, I was close to tears.

The Inspector nodded, took his notebook out and thumbed through well worn pages.

“As I see it, there are three realistic possibilities here. One, you are one of the best liars I’ve known and *are* guilty of these crimes. Personally, I don’t believe this to be the case. I’m a pretty good judge of character and you seem as straight as they come.”

“I am. In fact, more than one person has told me that I’m a typical victim type and couldn’t imagine me getting up to anything that I shouldn’t.” Actually, this was a bit of prevarication on my part. I’m like most folk. Only as honest as I have to be. I’ve been the receiver of more than one or two suspiciously cheap goods which I never asked any questions about. To life in the modern world, you need more than one face.

“The other possibility is that we are dealing with some sort of a super hacker. If this is the case, things could get much worse for you.”

“Huh! I can’t see how?”

“Your alleged falsified medical records...”

“It ain’t alleged!”

“Your falsified medical records say that you are an alcoholic and habitual drug user. What would your neighbours think if they found out that you were not only an alcoholic drug addict, but one who was HIV positive or had AIDS?”

“I suppose he could do that?”

“Or what if he made it seem like you were wanted for a crime you didn’t commit? Been already arrested, escaped and were now on the run?”

“Oh!”

“Oh, Indeed.”

“You said three possibilities. What’s the other one?”

“It’s the most likely of the three and the one that I hope isn’t true otherwise *we* have got real problems.”

“*We*’ve got problems? Is this the royal *We*?”

“Your Darkness guy might be a police officer.”



Hospital’s are not nice places. I suppose, given the circumstances, it was the best place for me. There was plenty of time to catch up on TV. The wards small fourteen inch coloured set was not in demand by any of the other three loonies whom I shared with.

One was an old man called Sid who was in the habit of shouting himself to sleep. One day, when a bird got trapped in the ward and couldn't get out, Sid started screaming and hid underneath the bed clothes.

Another of the loonies was a middle-aged balding man called Henry who used to fart himself wake in the mornings and play '*Flight Of The Bumble Bee*' on his ghetto blaster several times a day an obscene volume. I complained several times to both him and the nursing staff, but nothing was ever done about it.

The third inmate was a guy called Vic. He was about the same age as me and the most boring person I've ever met. He would spent hours and hours going on about the Romans. Analysing their history and comparing the reality with the Hollywood fiction. Apparently he was a proof-reader on some kind of a historical magazine. He considered television an abomination. The other two were just too busy being weird to bother with it.

Thus, I had the TV set to myself. The urinal catheter turned out to be a blessing in disguise (though I'm glad that I don't remember it going in). It meant that I didn't have to get out of bed at all. Just lie there all day, watch TV, or read and - when I was finally back on solid food - nibble all day. At first, I had to take several massive enzyme pills before eating anything and was warned that I might have to take them the rest of my life. A few days before leaving hospital, I was told that I no longer needed to take them. My pancreas was going to be okay, though I was warned not to consider getting drunk for at least a few months. The nibbling stopped for a while after I had minor surgery on my gums to remove fragments of broken teeth. A dentist had a look at them first, but there were not enough rooted fragments remaining to re-build them. I was offered false ones, but declined.

The team of plain clothes police that turned up to interview me were two men and a woman. In the movies the police use a technique known as '*good guy, bad guy*'. One cop is understanding, helpful and kind. The other a bastard intent on pinning every unsolved crime of the last fifty years on the interviewee. This team was bad guy, bad guy and bad woman. At one point, they switched the recorder off and asked me why I was doing this? Doing what? Making this all up, they said. Over and over they kept at me. Words back and forth like tennis balls. Suddenly, they ask if my marriage was a happy one.

“What has that got to do with anything?” I asked.

“Do you satisfy your wife in bed?” said the woman.

“Pardon?”

Without even pausing to give me enough time to be puzzled, one of the men thanked me and they abruptly left.

They came back the very next day and went over the very same ground in their assholier than thou manner. This time omitting the odd question at the end.



When I had been in the ward for nearly two weeks, I got a ‘*get worse*’ card from Darkness. It looked to have been printed on a home computer. On the front was the same picture of a dead body that had appeared on my computer that night it had been hacked. Inside was a short message.

“I’m sorry that it came to this, Tony. Really I am. Hurry up and get well. I’ve got some interesting plans for you.”

“Do you respect me yet?”

Darkness.

Ruth and Poppy came in to visit every day, though after a couple of weeks they started to come in only every other day. I could tell the strain they were under. Being a hospital visitor is not a pleasant pastime. They moved back into the family residence in order to get things ready for me coming out of hospital. Both of them were desperate to get the chance to nurse me to death. During their visits, I had a lot of fuss made of me and a constant supply of books, magazines, sweets and fruit.

The story I’d given Ruth was that I’d been beaten up by other prisoners in a mistaken identity case. She saw through this tissue of lies using the ESP powers that all wife’s have.

“Huh, Tony!” she said, “Do you think that I came up the Clyde on a water biscuit?”

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“I spoke to inspector Raeburn. It might have been mistaken identity, but it wasn’t your cell mates. It was the cops.”

“Er, um?”

“No, er, ums. If it was your cell mates it would have been an open and shut case.”

“Your right,” I agreed.

“Halle - bloody - luiah. You can have back a wee bit of your credibility for that! Now what actually happened?”

I gave her more or less the truth. The whole lot except for my suspicions about Darkness being behind it all. To save more worry, I did not mention Darkness at all. To say that Ruth was furious was a gross understatement. The vitriol that I’d spouted to inspector Raeburn was pale by comparison. I know it sounds odd, but I was so proud of the hissing spiting wildcat that she became when her man was wronged.



Spider came in once or twice a week. At first in the evening, but he switched to the afternoons (at the noble sacrifice of his college time) when he realised that Ruth did not like him very much. Poppy, on the other hand, adored him. They were always swapping hacker stories, exchanging programming tips and recommending websites (usually iffy ones). Ruth said that Spider was a degenerate. She might well be right?

He always brought a couple of cans worth of Super Lager in with him which he disguised by pouring into an old Lucosade bottle. There was no way that I was going to drink alcohol on top of all the painkillers and other drugs, but I needn’t have worried. The Super Lagers were not for me. They were for Spider. He couldn’t bear the thought of going so long without a drink. Maybe I’m jumping the gun, but I suspect that Spider might be developing a slight drink problem? He also brought in any literature that he could lay his hands on about hacking, security or anything loosely connected with these areas. To hunt down Darkness, I was going to have to beat him at his own game. During my time in hospital, I ingested and re-ingested an awful lot of interesting information about activities which could get me locked up on a real charge instead of a fake one.

After about ten days they removed the drains, stitches and the urinal catheter (my doctor was horrified that it had been left in for so long). The rotten swine's then forced me to re-learn the painful process of walking. After only ten days in bed my muscles had already atrophied to the point where I could not walk (or even stand) on my own.

Within a few days, I had my mobility back. Admittedly it was painful mobility, but nevertheless it was an important step on the road to recovery. At about the same time, I began to get painful boils in embarrassing places which I managed to hide from the nurses who took me regularly for a shower. If you'd asked me before hospital, I would have thought that I'd have been embarrassed by the thought of a nurse helping me wash (whilst I was sitting in a plastic seat), but I was far more concerned that they would see the boils and insist on lancing them. I had been through enough pain already and couldn't bare the thought of an ounce more. Besides, there was another reason that I was scared of getting them lanced. There was a boy at my secondary school who had a big boil on his neck (can't remember his name). He was standing in the family bathroom looking at the boil in the mirror. He decided to lance it himself with a darning needle. Just as he was about to stick the needle in, his big bother kicked the bathroom door wide open. The door hit his elbow and drove the needle deep into his neck and snapped off in the jugular vein which promptly ruptured. He bleed to death within a few minutes.



After eight days in intensive care and another twenty in the ward, I was finally allowed home. I would have been in much longer, but I was so anxious to start my search for Darkness that I pretended to be in a better condition than I was. Slowly I lowered the amount of co-proximal that I was using on the grounds that I didn't need it. In actuality, I ached all over. The large operation scar was particularly sore and itchy as was the plaster cast on my ankle. Urinating was still painful even although I'd been told that I was okay down below and not to worry about it. It was an infection that came from having the urinal catheter in so long.

Ruth came in by herself to take me home. I had the shock of my life when I discovered that my clothes no longer fitted me. According to the ward's digital scales, I

had lost nearly thirty pounds! The hospital lent me a walking stick to take home until I could get one from my local GP. Who, I suddenly remembered, wouldn't have given me the time of day. I could always register with another practice and claim not to have any medical records as I had never had been to a doctors before. I know that this would sound kinda unlikely, but let them try to prove otherwise. After all, it *had* worked on the hospital.



It was November the 5th when I went home. I remember because that night someone put a firecracker through our front door. The loud explosion made me jump about two feet in the air. The effect of this violent movement was to send a million volts of pain through my still hurting operation scar (Beaky was not very happy either - he did a *lot* of swearing and skracking). The doctor at the hospital said that I'd just have to put up with the pain as there was nothing stronger than Paracetamol that I could be given. He was lying. Ruth got me some co-codamol from the chemist. Mind you, it was not such better than the parrots-eat-em-all. I was told, It was very likely that I'd just wake up one morning and the pain would be gone. Wish it would hurry up.

After so long in the hospital, it was a big relief to get back to *our* home. Our home? I'd already began thinking of it again as *our* home. After Poppy and Ruth had left, I'd started of thinking of it as *my* home. As is the way of these things, the house did not look quite like I remembered. It was bigger, yet smaller, than I recollected. It was more cluttered and brighter. Beaky seemed far louder than I'd remembered him. Ruth had been rather pleased to discover that our little family had increased by one, even if it was a loud foul mouthed bird.

Two days after arriving back home, I got a letter from Burlington country park. We (we?) were still getting all that unsolicited junk mail and packages nearly every morning. If this was meant to be annoying us it was not working. In fact, I rather enjoyed opening all the mail.

Dear Mr Blair

It is my unfortunate duty to be the harbinger of bad news. As you are aware, for quite some time Burlington country park has been in danger of closing due to financial difficulties. Last Monday this possibility became fact. As a result, the park is now officially closed and the Receiver has been called in.

Despite numerous attempts, we are unable to find an alternative home for your animal. We can not keep Petal much longer than another week. If, by that time, a home is still not been located, I will have no alternative but to have Petal put to sleep. If I do not hear from you within ten days, I will proceed with this action. As the legal owner of this animal, any vet bills that this action incurs will be passed on to you.

I am sorry for the short notice, but the situation has been taken out of my hands. I hope you can find Petal a new home. We do not want to have to get any of the animals put to sleep, nevertheless a few of them have not yet secured a new home. If you know of anyone willing to take on any of our animals, I would be grateful if you could put them in touch with the park as soon as possible.

Yours Sincerely

Thomas King

CEO

Burlington Country Park

Poor Petal! The flower that no one wanted. Although Ruth had not been present at the auction when we bought Petal, she had been up to visit her on numerous occasions and (like me) had become quite attached to her. I knew before telling the girls that it would be a unanimous family decision to pull out all the stops and find Petal a new home. No

matter what happened over the next ten days, one thing was for certain, we would find the darling little bundle of fur a place to lay her hat.

After ten days of phone calls to zoos and parks all over the UK, we were not a single step closer to finding Petal a home. It looked like the poor thing was going to be put to sleep after all.

“No! I will not allow it. You cannot murder her, dad!” Declared Poppy.

“Neither will I,” said Ruth.

“But, what else we can do?” I said.

“We can bring her home. We’ve a big garden. She would love running about in it,” said Ruth, “I’m sure we’ll find her a proper home within a few weeks.”

“But, what about the smell?” I asked.

“Petal will just have to put up with it.”

“I really don’t think it’s such a good idea. What will the neighbours think?”

“Och, stuff them. Who cares what they think? I’ll only be for a wee while. It’s only a matter of time before a proper home is found.”

After a visit to the pet shop for a collar and lead (Butch’s old ones were too big), Ruth took our beat up jalopy up to the park to give Petal a ride back to her new (if temporary) home. Poppy went too. I wanted to go as well, but Ruth told me that I wasn’t well enough. I considered objecting to this tyranny, but I didn’t feel well enough to argue.

After so long, it was good to see Petal again. Whilst in hospital, I often dreamt about her and that little feathered fiend. When she arrived at our house, she remembered me and gave me the usual cat like greeting of rubbing her head against my legs.

“Hi ya, beautiful,” I scratched behind her ears. She got so excited that she started with that leg thumping. Thought she was only suppose to do that when frightened?

Like a dog, Petal explored the house and back garden exceedingly intimately paying particular attention to our garden gnome Boris. Eventually she figured that she could trust Boris and got back to the serious business of doing the inventory of our family estate. much to my surprise, I discovered that she was fully house trained. I remembered that she had often been allowed to roam about inside the park country museum. Must have been house trained then?

It was luck that we had a garden. I would not have been all that happy taking a skunk out for a pee in the middle of the night. I remember all too well what like it had been taking Butch out at all hours when we lived in a two apartment without any garden. Nevertheless, Petal still needed her exercise. Poppy was bursting to put the collar and lead on her and parade up and down the neighbourhood. While adults were instinctively distrusting of Petal, the neighbourhood kids didn't believe any of what they had heard about skunks. Within a matter of days, Petal had become quite a celebrity and as such was much in demand. She got more visitors than we did. It became quite a regular occurrence for the door to be knocked by a small jam faced, snottory nosed kid looking for Poppy. If Poppy was not available, then they would ask, "Can Petal come out to play then?" Which is what they wanted to know in the first place.

Much as I hate to admit it, Petal fitted in just great with our lifestyle. It would be a sad day when it is time for her to go. The feathered fiend even got on well with her. Beaky spent a good deal of his time riding around on her back. Usually she would grin and bear this demeaning behaviour. Sometimes she would not tolerate it at all and would roll over onto her back to dislodge him. This would anger Beaky to such an extent that he would often sulk for hours.

Have you any idea what skunks eat? No, either had I. It turned out not to be a problem. She would eat anything that moved and anything that didn't. She was particularly fond of slugs and beetles, but would force down fish suppers and slippers if you were stupid enough to leave them unguarded (and I was). Most of the time she settled for dog or cat food. Unlike Beaky, Petal was not an alcoholic, but would nevertheless do *anything* to get a drink of Irn Bru. The first time she tasted it was by accident when Poppy upended a can over the kitchen floor. Tentatively she spent a long time sniffing it suspiciously before enthusiastically cleaning it up with her extremely rough tongue. I wonder if it would be a good idea to phone up the Irn Bru people and tell them about Petal's addiction? Maybe they would put her in one of their adverts? Maybe they would give us a years supply of Irn Bru? It's worth thinking about.

To Poppy, Petal became a new best friend. She was obsessed with teaching her as many tricks as possible and Petal wanted to learn as many as possible.

"Guess what I taught her today, dad?"

“How to do your homework?”

“No,” she said annoyed, “Watch this. Petal?”

“Petal was sniffing about the living room. At the sound off her name, she pricked up her small ears like a dog and turned in Poppy’s direction.

“Go get it, Petal. Go get it,” said Poppy.

Petal ran to one of her chew toys (a mouse) and hovered over it.

“No,” said Poppy.

She took off again. This time she stopped with a paw on her headless teddy bear.

“No,” said Poppy.

She jumped on the sofa and pawed at a cushion.

“Yes.”

Petal grabbed the cushion by a corner.

“No,” said Poppy, “The other one.”

She let go and took hold of another cushion.

“Yes. That’s the one.”

She dragged the cushion off the sofa and over to Poppy.

“Good girl!” Poppy ruffled her fur and Petal danced like a puppy.

“That’s really good!” I said.

“That’s nothing. Watch this? Petal? Where’s ducky? Go get ducky.”

Petal started to run back and forwards all over the living room looking for the duck. Intensely concentrating as she explored every corner.

“Ducky is in the bathroom, Petal.”

Enthusiastically, at great speed, Petal left the room. The noise she made whilst going upstairs was exactly like someone falling downstairs. How such a small animal could sound so loud is a mystery. Mind you, when she is in a hurry, Poppy can be like that too. Surprisingly quickly, Petal was rushing back downstairs with something grasped firmly in her mouth. The something was dropped at Poppy’s feet. It was a bar of soap.

“Och, well she is getting better,” said Poppy.

“Keep at it pumpkin. I’m sure she’ll get the hang of it eventually,” I said.

Petal started to lick the bar of soap. Much to her disappointment, I took the bar off her. Yet another thing that we would have to watch her over? She has already taken a

fascination to paper money. Whenever she sees any, she grabs it and hides it underneath Poppy's bed. She has her own preferences. If there is a few notes left lying about she will take the twenties and leave the rest.



And what of Darkness whilst all this happy families nonsense was going on? Well, he was history. A few days after coming home from hospital, I managed to track him down. Getting into my old car, I drove down to his hiding place, murdered him in cold blood, danced on his grave, drove home and lived happily ever after. Well? No, not quite. Nothing in life is ever that simple. Sigh!



There was still lots of research to do before even thinking about attempting to track down Darkness. Poppy and Spider gave me lists of underground websites to visit. I would have been surfing morning, noon and night if it wasn't for Ruth who insisted that I needed plenty of rest if I was to ever get better. Pity she did not know what I was up to on the web when she was at work.

I tracked down an astonishing amount of information. Most of it was rubbish written up by teenagers who had obviously never even tried what they claimed to know about. My researches, at first on hacking, soon spread to other interesting areas. I found a couple of interesting essays on how to murder people and another on how to hide dead bodies. All this underground stuff was truly fascinating. Obsessively, I learned how to create a new identities, hack, crack, make bombs, steal free telephone calls and dozens of other potentially useful - though extremely illegal - skills. Darkness was an unknown quantity and as such, I intended loading the dice in my favour using any method available. If it was possible to learn it, I learned it. Okay, maybe, I'm going over the top a bit - okay a lot - but I had time to kill and this stuff was so interesting. Volumes like the *Anarchists* and *The Jolly Rogers* cookbooks were all-time classics. A bit dated, but still a great read. If they were ever published by someone like Penguin books, they would be an instant bestseller.

I spent quite a long time learning how to pick locks (just in case). I could not believe how easy combination locks were to get round. I made my own lock picks out of tiny alan-keys and bits of spring steel. I even bought several locks from the local hardware store, dismantled and learned how to pick them.

Eventually, learning was becoming repetitive. I was learning less and less as I reached a kinda event horizon regarding the availability of forbidden knowledge. I'm sure that there is a lot more out there, but the real good stuff was becoming harder and harder to find. It was time to start the quest.

One evening, when Ruth was out at the Bingo, Spider, Poppy and myself discussed tactics. I was reluctant to involve a teenybopper in all this, but as Spider so rightly pointed out, Poppy knew more about the internet than either of us. After a long discussion we ended up with a realistic (if complicated) action plan. There was a lot more ground to cover than I'd expected. In fact, I was already having doubts that we weren't doing anything more than wasting our time.

The key to our plan relied upon two criteria. Catching Darkness while he was actually online to the internet and then tracing him to his Internet Service Provider. Once we got the ISP's name we could get lots of other info on him from public records or at a push by illegally interrogating the server. What I'd do with this information was anyone's guess. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. There is a lot to be done first before we reach that point.

The first step was to go to several servers where all the UseNet newsgroup messages are archived and search back years - if necessary - for all postings by anyone using the nickname Darkness. Well that was the idea. The implementation of this stratagem was somewhat different in practice.

In *Deja News* alone there were 620,011 references to Darkness spelled with a capital Dee. Oh shit! I modified the search, this time for messages with the word Darkness included only the subject field. This narrowed it down a little to only 49,866 hits. Messages that contained Darkness only in the *from* or *to* fields were not much better at 31,002 hits. This was as narrow as I could pin the search down.

Disappointed, I downloaded the whole thirty-one thousand odd messages. It only took just over an hour and a half. Using an old (but fast) *DOS* program called *Xtree Gold*, I ran various searches on the downloaded database of messages. Within a few

minutes, I had narrowed the search down to just over a thousand messages which had either originated from or been sent to the UK. This would be the really boring bit. I had to read through *all* the messages looking for indications that the author was *my* Darkness. As my criteria I choose any messages which were overtly polite or had anything to do with hacking, cracking etc. At the end of a couple of hours, I had forty possible's. A bit better than the original 620,011 messages, eh?

If reading all the messages had been boring, tracking down the possible's was mind numbingly tedious. Using Finger, Whois and other clients I began tracing the top forty. Most of the time, the information that I required was readily available or took relatively little subterfuge and a little bit of social engineering to worm out of the ISP's support teams. One time, I had to hack into an account. Although I was extremely pleased that I had managed to do this, it was fruitless. There was one Twilight Zone moment when I managed to trace one particular Darkness to Burlington. It was a big relief to discover that the Burlington Darkness was a schoolboy called Trevor who had not posted any messages in newsgroups within the last six months. It was obviously not him. Ruth had been attacked by a man not a schoolboy.

The result of all this expenditure of energy? Zero. Nada. Diddly squat. Time invested? fifty-three hours. Groan! And the methods that I'd used to narrow down the final search would not have caught any postings from anonymous re-mailers or through proxy servers. I could get the proxies only by going through every single one of the downloaded 31,002 messages. Then I would have to trace and hack into the proxies which wouldn't be easy (or likely to have much success). I had just got lucky on the previous hack (the ISP had left the Telnet port open). All this time wasted? And that was just on one server full of archives. There were more archive servers to search and then two dozen instant messenger type servers similar to *ICQ*. Not to mention the masses of *Napster* clones that had sprung up over the past year or so? There were still chat rooms and other resources to consider. Surely there must be an easier way to implement our action plan? Apparently not.

Girding my loins, I kept at it day after day. So did Spider and Poppy. Methodically plodding through the data flow. Searching. Sifting. Evaluating. Re-evaluating. Until, eventually weeks later, we had completed the action plan. What had we discovered? Quite a lot. What precisely? Well, actually all right, I'm lying.

Nothing at all. Darkness was invisible. Between us, we did not discover as little as a single Scooby snack. Beaky would have been better at searching than us. I asked him to have a go, but he just wasn't interested. Neither was Petal. With a whimper, everything ground to a shuddering anti-climax.

And then...

Chapter Seven

Anarchy In The UK

*“What evils are not wrought by Anarchy!
She ruins States, and overthrows the home,
She dissipates and routs the embattled host;
While discipline preserves the ordered ranks.
Therefore we must maintain authority...”*

Sophocles

The beginning of December turned out to be rather eventful. It started with an historic argument with Poppy and Ruth. For once I was on Ruth's side. Poppy had been to the hairdressers on the pretext of getting a trim and came back with a short bob dyed bright green. She was so pleased with herself that she threw a tantrum when Ruth and I did not approve. She then had the cheek to say that she would get it dyed back to normal if we would let her get her nose pierced. Now that *was* an argument that will go down in history. We all ended up as both winners and losers. Poppy got to keep her new hair style on the understanding that she would *never* try to get anything pierced other than her ears.

Next day was a welcome visit to the hospital to get that itching plaster cast off my leg, which was just as well as I was due back at work in a week.

“You will not believe how relieved I am to be getting this thing off,” I told the nurse.

“I know how you feel. I had a broken leg when I was a teenager. Fell off a swing,” she said looking at me questioningly over the top of her pink, metal rimmed glasses. Despite her rather plain appearance, this look sent wake up messages to a certain part of my anatomy. Even at school, I loved it when the female teachers would look at me in that way. I remember one particular teacher, Miss Green, who was only about nineteen. She looked over the top of her glasses rather a lot; melting my fifteen year old heart every time. I know that its not a very nice request, but I wish that Ruth would get

glasses. Wide ones. It would emphasise her great eyes even more. Unfortunately, she has 20/20 vision. Doesn't even wear sunglasses. Bah!

"All this itching and pins and needles are driving me insane," I said

"Pins and needles? How often?"

"Nearly all the time."

"What, all the time since you got it set?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell your G.P.?"

"I thought that it was normal? Never had a broken bone before."

"The itching is. The pins and needles ain't. At least, having them all the time."

The nurse took something out of a drawer that looked disturbingly like a Black and Decker. There was a small circular cutting blade on the end of it. I don't know why, but I had assumed that something like a pair of tin snips would be used to remove the cast? The thing sounded uncomfortable like a dentists drill. During the course of the short event, I was on standby for the worse eventuality. One slip and that tiny shining blade would just as easily cut through skin, muscle and bone. I needed have worried, she was a real expert. It was all over swiftly and painlessly.

Without the ugly encumbrance, my foot was still hurting, numb and that stiff that I could not bend my ankle at all. They took an x-ray and discovered that two of the small bones in my ankle had partially fused together. Also pressing on a nerve, they were causing something called *Tarsal Tunnel Syndrome*. Normally this would heal up all by its self (eventually), but with the fused bones, it would have to be corrected by surgery. My name was put on the waiting list, but it was likely to be several months before I even got to see a specialist - let alone have the operation. Another legacy of Darkness. Sigh.

"Hi Tony. Sorry I have not been in touch for a few weeks, but I've been rather busy. Don't worry. I've not forgotten about you. In fact, quite the reverse. I've got something really special lined up for you. What is it? Well, that would be telling. Suffice to say, that although I will have a good laugh at your expense, I do not think that you will be very happy about what is

going to happen to you. It should only take a day or two for the events I've set in motion to gather momentum. Pretty soon you're gonnie have no friends left. Still, look on the bright side. The less friends you've got in life the less funerals you will have to attend."

"Catch you later, Tony. Enjoy!"

Darkness



A couple of days later the newspaper boy delivered the bomb shell. I was enjoying a recently developed habitual lie-in. Ruth was downstairs getting ready to go to work when the shit hit the fan. Looking rather serious, she brought the newspaper in and threw it on the bed.

"I think, you've got some explaining to do?" she said.

Still half a sleep, I glanced at the front page. The large black letters poked there way sharply into my brain. I was instantly wide awake.

Local Paedophile Discovered Living Less Than Half A Mile From School

The *'Daily Bastard'* had received information that paedophile, Tony Blair, had been released a few months ago from a seven year sentence. Since then, he had been living near Jacob Street primary school. I expect that they would have loved to use the headline *'Tony Blair Paedophile'*, but there was no way they could have got away with it. The other Tony Blair would have sued their ass off for misrepresentation.

"It's not true," I said weakly.

"Huh, I bloody know that! I would have noticed if you'd been banged up for seven years. What the hell is going on Tony? According to that, you have been in and out of

jail all your life for all kinds of horrid things. Not only that, you are a long term alcoholic junkie!”

“It’s just a case of misidentification,” I said.

“You said that about the doing you got in jail. I still say that you should sue the shirt off of their backs.”

“It’s being dealt with!”

“What *exactly* is being dealt with? What is *really* going on Tony? I ain’t all that stupid.”

“Nothing is going on! It’s just unfortunate that I’ve got the same name as this other guy.”

“Bollocks.”

“I probably look nothing like him.”

“Still bollocks.”

She flicked through the newspaper and opened it at a particular page. There, in spectacular colour, was the picture of me that was on the college website.

“Oh, bollocks,” I said.

“Exactly. Spill the beans, Tony. I’m getting angry. You know what happens when I get annoyed.”

“No more rumpy pumpy?”

“Oh do shut up!”

“Sorry, Ruth,” I sighed and proceeded to tell her the whole story. About Poppy’s initial problem in the newsgroup. The messages from Darkness. The business at the medical centre and all the rest of the whole nefarious situation.

“How on Earth did you think that you could keep this all secret?”

“Me being worried by myself is better than both of us being worried.”

“Rubbish! I would have found out sooner or later. If he tries to have a go at me again, I’ll do a lot more than just kick him in the balls. Have you had our phone number changed?”

“Eh? Erm, no?” I could not spot the connection.

“Well, he’s tried just about every harassment under the sun. Why not the phone?”

“D’know. I hadn’t thought about it?”

“All he would need to do is get some business cards advertising a sex line with our phone number on it and leave them in phone box’s, pubs etcetera. In fact there is a million ways he could use the phone to get at you.”

“There have been some weird calls,” I said.

“Yeah, but not all that many. I’ve been back here for over a month and the phone has hardly ever rang.”

“I don’t know? He probably...” With dawning realisation, I trailed into silence.

“What?”

“If the phone line is tied up all the time with nuisance calls, I wouldn’t be able to connect to the internet?”

“And?”

“If I can’t connect to the internet, I can’t receive any e-mail from him. And he loves baiting me.”

“Thank heavens for small mercies!”

“The packet sniffer!” I slapped myself hard in the forehead. This time it was Ruth’s turn to be confused.

“Eh?” she said.

“He put a packet sniffer on my POP and SMTP accounts. I forgot, he’s still reading all my e-mail. We can feed him false information! Set a trap. Create a situation that’s just dying to be exploited. Something where he thinks he’s gonna get me real good and then nab the bastard!”

“What is a packet sniffer?” said Ruth, her forehead wrinkling into *that* look.

“It is a kinda bot...”

“Bot?”

“Software Robot. Just an automated program that monitors information coming in and out of a system. It then sends copies of these data packets to wherever it has been programmed.”

“And, Darkness put one on your e-mail account?”

“Yes! I had forgot all about the packet sniffer. When he first mentioned it, I did not know what it was. I learned about packet sniffers a while back, but it did not click into place until just now!”

Ruth was not at all enthusiastic about this idea. Inspector Raeburn was on the case. Let him handle it. She also pointed out that this maniac was dangerous. He had already tried a spot of rape. Maybe he would also enjoy a spot of murder or torture? Maybe he had even worse tastes? We knew nothing about him at all except for the fact that he was - if not a psychopath then - very defiantly a sociopath. And a particularly warped one at that. Did he carry a gun? Did he carry a knife? I don't care. I'm going to get him anyway. He's gonnie wish that it was the police who caught him instead of me. Slowly and surely I began to formulate another action plan. A candle had been lit in the Darkness. A bright candle. A bloody bright candle!



Later, the same day, things began to get ugly. Real ugly. Contrary to Ruth's orders, I insisted that it was my turn to take the wheelie bin out to the pickup point in the car park. It wouldn't be picked up until tomorrow morning at seven AM. What the hell were bin men doing out at that time of day?

It was already pretty dark when I limped out to the car park. With a walking stick in one hand and the wheelie bin in the other, I trundled out to the pickup point. A hundred or so yards down the street, a small group had gathered on a grassy patch. There were four male youths drinking out of bottles, one older woman and several kids. They were all milling about talking loudly and angrily. They did not look like the usual gang of drunks which often hung about on that corner. Apart from the woman, they were much younger and not so quiet. I was glad that the pickup point (which already had several wheelie bins at it) was not anywhere near them. Even from this distance, you could smell trouble off them.

"There's the fucking pervert! There. Look!" One of them shouted at me. The others turned to look.

"So you like shaggin' kiddies day ya mister?" Shouted the woman.

"Get the cunt!" shouted the first one.

The four guys and a couple of the older kids started to run toward me. I was off like a two bob rocket as fast as my limp would let me (which turned out to be surprisingly fast). I dropped the walking stick. A bottle whizzed by my ear, coming

millimetres from ending my problems there and then. It was followed by a tirade of disappointed (and repetitive) abuse. I didn't stop to lock the garden gate. In fact, I had barely enough time to get back into the house, before they started to kick the door in.

For a few seconds, I was the only thing holding the door shut. Then, just as it looked like they were going to get the door open and storm the kitchen, I managed to slip the bolt in place followed shortly by the door lock and then the chain. This really annoyed them. With more profane shouts of '*Pervert*' and '*Paedo*' joined together with an even more colourful vocabulary, they continued to kick at the back door. They were pissing into the wind there. The door had reinforced panels of glass in it though which a thick wire mesh was embedded. There ain't no way they're going to get through that. The glass cracked. The crack, at first small, soon spread and joined up with other cracks which had appeared as if by magic. Bit of glass fired out into the room and the muffled shouting became louder.

"Here." It was Ruth. She had her coat on. The one I liked. The long red one. Whilst I was out with the wheelie bin, she had been at the corner store. She was holding two large heavy lengths of wood. I've no idea where she got them from. Probably the cupboard under the stairs. There's everything under there. Without a word I took one of the lumps of wood. With extreme trepidation we waited unspeaking for the door to cave in. Pretty soon, there was no more glass left in the bottom door panel. It was just a matter of time before the buckling wire mesh was broken through, except...

They gave up. The mesh was too strong. One of the youths, breathing heavily, stood outside the door in silence for a while.

"Hey, you in there?" he said bending to look through the mesh, "You fuckin' hear me?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"We are gonna kill you."

"Right."

"Do you believe us?"

"Yes."

"You scared?"

"Yes." I was amazed at how calm I sounded.

“You better be!”

“I am.”

“Well, you better be!”

“I am.”

“And you, lady. Ya should be ashamed ‘o yer self,” he grinned like a manic and curled his fingers through the mesh

“Why?” said Ruth.

“Living with a paedophile.”

“He ain’t a paedophile.”

“Aye he is ‘n’ you need a good seeing tay fay a real man.”

“Do you have a big cock?” This remark surprised both me and the youth.

“Erm, aye,” he said confused.

“Then go and fuck your self with it!”

He was not please at this remark. He gave a fake laugh and the door one last kick before announcing to his colleagues, “Shitting ‘em self’s!” They all had a good laugh at this and stayed in our garden shouting and banging on the door.

“I’m phoning the police,” said Ruth leaving the room. From the hallway, I heard her try the phone. “Phone’s dead. Line probably been cut,” she said.

“That was quick?”

Just then, one of the nearby kitchen windows was shattered by a flying object. The object turned out to be Boris. Glass exploded everywhere. I instinctively shut my eyes and tried to get my hands up to my face. Too slow. Some small bits struck me hard in the face. I could feel slivers sticking to my eyelids and face. I tried to pick them off.

“No, leave it. I’ll do it,” said Ruth, “Keep your eyes shut.”

I ignored her and tried to pick the bits off. Ruth batted my hands away and swore at me. Gingerly, I felt her pick the larger pieces off.

“Keep them shut. There are loads of tiny bits that are too small to pick off. I can see them glistening. Wait here.”

“Where am I going to go?”

She was back within moments with my can of compressed air that I used to clean my camera lens with. A few squirts from that and I was able to open my eyes again. I rubbed a hand over my face. It came away smeared with blood.

“My face is bleeding?”

“Och, it’s just a couple of wee scratches, that’s all.”

I had a look in the hallway mirror. The couple of ‘*wee scratches*’ turned up to be several deep cuts and one nasty looking gash that looked as if it needed a stitch or two.

There came the sound of another window caving in. This time upstairs.

“Poppy!” Panicked Ruth.

“It’s okay,” I grabbed at her arm to stop her running up stairs. There is nothing stronger than the power of a mother whose pup is in danger. “She’s in my study playing with the computer. No windows in there.”

“Thank God for that.” She did not look at all good. Pretty scared and shaky. Much as I felt.

“What are we going to do, Tony?”

I didn’t have a clue. I was used to Ruth taking control of any situations at a moments notice. I had never considered that in a real moment of crises she would not know what to do. She was far stronger than me. Far, far stronger than me. She demonstrated just how strong she was by suddenly bursting out crying.

“Why us Tony?”

“I don’t know? Just lucky, I guess.” I gave her a firm cuddle. I needed one myself. For a long time we stood there in the dimness of our hallway with the door leading to the kitchen open. I intended keeping an eye on that broken window. For a while, Ruth sobbed uncontrollably and I pretended to be strong.

“I think they’ve gone away?” I said. I went back into the kitchen. I was wrong. There were loads of people in the garden.

“Fucking pervert!” screamed a skinhead sticking his head through the broken kitchen window, “Am gonnie malky you ya bastard!” He must have been standing on something as the ground floor windows are at least seven feet from the ground. To reinforce his point, he brandished an old rusty (but sharp looking) cut-throat razor. Repeating his threat by paraphrase, he knocked out some of the remaining spears of glass and started to climb in.

I picked up one of the lengths of wood which minutes before I’d been placed on the nearby kitchen table. A wide swing ended at his head. The thwack didn’t sound or feel like I would have expected. The feeling that conducted its way up through the smooth

pine was the same as plunging a blunt knife into an under-ripe melon. A kinda puncturing sensation. The sound was that of a pool ball being struck.

The hand holding the razor dropped the evil object and clutched at the length of wood. Tugging, he gave a long animal like moan. Tugging? It was then that I spotted the nail sticking out of the part of the wood which had impacted with his head. The half inch of protruding galvanised metal looked like the head of a six incher. Given the thickness of the wood, at least two inches of metal was sticking through the skinheads skull and into his brain; possibly more. There was no blood. He must have lost his footing and fell back out into the garden. So doing, the length of wood was wrenched out of my hand and went with him. There was blood on the end of the wood. The tip of the nail had a blob of black gunge on it. Hair was stuck to it.

Outside, another skinhead was bringing his arm back in preparation of throwing a very large rock. I dived out of the way. Seconds later, another of the kitchen windows shrapnelled inward. The rock continuing its flight, smashed its way through the florescent light fitting and dropped down onto the table destroying the salt cellar. A short time later, came the sound of one of the living room windows being panned in.

In the garden, a young woman (cursing obscenities) was helping a hippy looking bloke (who looked a bit like Spider) carry in a heavy wooden crate which they put down in the recently vacated bin place. Opening the crate, the hippy reached inside and removed a lemonade bottle. Even at this distance, I could see that instead of a bottle top there was a wad of cloth. By the time I realised what he was going to do, he was already lighting the thing. Holding it at arms length, he allowed time for it to properly catch fire. He was grinning. Then laughing. Then screaming...

When he tossed the petrol-bomb through the nearest broken window, I got lucky for the first time in ages. Acting without thinking, I dived and stretched. There wasn't time to consider that I would not catch it. If I'd time to think, I would not have tried. For a start, I was reaching with the wrong hand. There was no way I could make a catch like that, but catch it I did. It was the luckiest thing that has happened to me in years. Some of the petrol dribbled out and onto my hand. Just how it managed to get out of the bottle without igniting puzzles me. I only had a second or so to wonder about this before my hand popped into flames.

Still acting instinctively, I threw the Molotov cocktail out of the window. By even more luck, it landed smack in the middle of the open crate. The crate whooshed up in tall flames. Hippy bloke and woman struggled to get out of the garden whilst I ripped off one of the nearby curtains and used it to smother the flames. Bizarrely, I gave silent thanks to God that it was my left hand which was burnt and not my right. You ever tried going for a pee with the wrong hand?

Hippy bloke fell over violently hitting his head on the frame of the back gate. The crate exploded. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was violent. An expanding cloud of liquid and gaseous petrol rushed upwards and outwards engulfing hippy bloke. All the other folk in the garden were off over the short side fencing into neighbouring gardens. One old guy didn't seem to be aware that one of his coat sleeves was on fire.

That was when hippy bloke started screaming. He managed to crawl a few feet whilst several youths beat at his flames with their jackets. How decent of them. The woman stood pointing and screaming. Screaming and pointing.

"Billy! Billy!"

Screaming...

Over and over.

"Billy! Billy!"

Screaming...

Over and over.

The fence and the bin place was on fire. All along the garden path were blobs and pools of burning material. None of which even came close to endangering the house. I noticed that none of the neighbours had so much as stuck their noses outside to see what was going on. Not that I blame them.

Despite their efforts, the flames burned for a long time. So did the screaming which eventually stopped before the flames. The woman wept for Billy. I didn't. I went back into the hallway and shut the kitchen door behind me. I was sure that they would now storm the house so I locked all the connecting doors. When we had moved in, I put large heavy bolts on the tops and bottoms of the hallway side of the doors. The idea being that if a burglar broke in whilst we were in bed, they would only be able to get as far as that one room. Ruth examined the burn. It was red looking, but not that sore. My jumper was singed.

Outside, something else exploded enthusiastically. This time it was loud, but didn't sound as if it came from the garden. Orange light flickered through our sanctuary. There was a lot of shouting and cheering. I went up stairs and tentatively looked out of a broken window on to a scene that could *not* have existed.

The small crowd had increased to a several hundred strong restless lynch mob. The biggest surprise that the enormous amount of women and children about. They don't normally attend public disturbances, do they? Some kids were even riding up and down on bikes. How had they managed to get so many scumbags together in such a hurry? Surely there were not that amount of arseholes in Burlington? When I say arseholes, I of course mean concerned citizens. After all, all they were doing was responding to a threat towards the communities children. The good citizens had set fire to my car and since they did not know which one was mine, they set fire to two others just in case they were mine. That must have been what the explosion had been. Lucky there had not been more cars or they would have got them too.

As I watched, A brick went through a neighbours window. Followed by another. And another. This was justifiable behaviour as these obviously wicked neighbours might have done really bad things like saying '*Hello*' to me on the street. So much for good citizens. And they actually let folk like these breed?

As I watched, one of the nice citizens pitched a can though the broken window. It hit the far wall, denting the plasterboard and bouncing to the ground. I picked it up. Irn Bru. A full can! Jolly good. That would do Beaky later when the fizz had settled back down. Beaky? Where were the terrible twins? I needn't have worried. They were in the office with Poppy. Beaky was perched on top of the computer monitor with his head tucked under a wing. Petal was curled up in her basket (one of many scattered throughout the house) underneath the desk giving small skunky snores. Sleeping like babies.

"What's all that noise outside? I'm trying to code," said Poppy.

Noise? I was amazed! World war three was going on outside and all she had heard was a bit of a noise? Surely the study was not that sound proofed even with the door shut?

"Just some drunks shouting," I said.

"What was those big bangs? Thought I heard glass breaking?"

“Yes, they broke a couple of windows.”

“Idiots! Set mum on them. She’ll soon sort ‘em out.”

“Not this time, Poppet!”

“Don’t call me that! I hate that. Oh...dad?”

“What?”

“Your face? What happened to your face?”

As punctuation, came the loud sound of one of the bedroom windows smashing followed by a thump of a heavy object. Poppy jumped and yelped.

“Dad!” Her cry woke the terrible two. Beaky looked at me as if it was my fault. Yawning, (his tongue is blue!) he stretched first his wings then his scrawny legs. Petal sat up, gave me a dirty look, curled up and tried to go back to sleep. For such a young animal, she doesn’t have a lot of energy. Beaky started to bob up and down singing the Spice Girls.

Poppy’s yelp activated Ruth’s mothering circuit and she forced her way into already full room and cuddled Poppy. Poppy struggled, but could not break free from this powerful maternal grip.

“Mum!” complained Poppy fruitlessly.

In the distance came the sound of a fire engines siren. The Calvary! With any luck, the police would shortly follow them. Surely, one of the neighbours must have called them with the fire brigade?

As the fire engine arrived screaming, the crowd began to disperse. They disappeared even faster when the wail of a police car or two was heard in the distance. Good. About time too. Within minutes, the fire boys were spraying the fence and the burning cars. The police arrived and took statements off of anyone who was still hanging about (which wasn’t many) and then came in to interview us. They wanted me to go to hospital to have my face stitched and my burn dressed, but I would not go. The forensic boys examined the remains of the burnt hippy bloke. Photographing it from every conservable angle. Of the skinhead with a nail in his brain, there was no sign.

Several hours later the boys in blue finally left - leaving a solitary copper to guard the property - and we tried to get some sleep on empty stomachs. Despite the reassurance that a glazier or joiner would do something about the damage downstairs, (the copper was going to keep an eye on him) none of us were able to sleep for hours.

The only room in the house without a broken window (apart from the bathroom) was our bedroom. Poppy and the animals slept in with us. I wanted them to stay in my study, but Ruth and Poppy over-ruled me.

A glazier did not turn up that night. However, at about 10:00 AM the next morning, a joiner turned up to put large boards of plywood over the downstairs windows. As for the upstairs windows, he just stapled them over with thick polythene sheeting. An hour later a portly glazier turned up. He had a pencil stub tucked behind an ear and was smoking a roll-up. I joined him outside for a look at the damage. There was a lot of graffiti and broken glass, but the fire had not touched the house at all. The burnt out cars were left there to rot alongside several wheelie bins that had melted down into a amorphous mess. The bastards! The council charges eighty quid for a replacement. Would the house insurance cover replacement?

I was not able to repair the phone line this time. It had not only been cut but trimmed back to the edge of the pipe and the hole in the wall. This was a job for BT. They would probably have to dig the alleyway up to fix it. I wasn't sure that it would be worth all the bother? With the story now in the public eye, we could expect all kinds of nasty phone calls from not on. It is too easy to get a hold of our phone number as we are in the book. Even if we were ex-directory, I'm sure that someone would managed to dig it up and spread it around. I could use the internet connection at work or in an emergency (reluctantly) go over to Ruth's mothers to use Poppy's connection. Much to Poppy's annoyance, her new computer had still not yet been moved to our house. As I was, for the time being, effectively cut off from Darkness, my new plan would have to wait a little longer.

The glazier chewed at his fat lips for a while, sucked air in sharply and uttered the legend, "It's gonnie cost you!"

"How much?"

More lip chewing. Another sharp intake of breath.

"Couldn't do it for less than three grand. Three and a half if you want it done this week."

Groan!

"Pity you are not a council tenant 'cause then they would have to pay for it."

"But we are," I cheered up.

“Then your laughing.”

“When can you do it?”

“There is a four to five week backlog for council jobs. But this is an emergency, I could do it in...” He broke off to consult a greasy looking battered notebook, “..a few weeks time. How does the week between Christmas and New Years Eve suit you?”

“Can’t you do it sooner?”

“Yeah, but it’ll cost you!”

Bah! I still had our nest egg tucked up inside the hot-water bottle, but I was not about to let the whole lot escape in a oney, I might be needing it for something else quite soon. When I got my act together and finally managed to track Darkness down, perhaps he would take a bribe? Maybe I could hire a hit man? Spider would probably do it for a couple of bottles of whisky and a jar of pickled eggs.

“We’ll wait,” I said.

“Suit yer self, pal,” he shrugged.



Ruth decided to move back into her mothers with Poppy. The old battle axe refused to take the animals. I can understand the reluctance to let a skunk into her house, but Beaky? Luckily, this also gave me an excuse not to go and stay at Ruth’s mothers. I was offered the sofa. I refused to go with them on the pretext that it would be cruel to leave the animals by themselves.

It took three days for BT to come and fix the phone line. They did not dig the street up. The engineer used something a bit like a plumbers snake to thread a new cable down the pipe. The small naked gap between the end of the pipe and the hole in the wall was bridged by a flexible corrugated metal tube through which the cable was passed. It would not be so easy to cut now. It would take a hacksaw at least.

After the civil disturbance, the police started to drop by several times a day. Several times a day people would have to be moved on as they hung about looking suspicious. On the same day as the telephone engineer arrived, so did a crowd of protesters. They were a peaceful, but annoying lot. I couldn’t leave the house without them following me about waving their anti-paedophile placards at me whilst shouting

all sorts of things. They refused to be moved on by the police and so two coppers were assigned to watch the house and stop them following me. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. The protesters went home late in the evening each day, but were back early each morning. It was not the same protesters all day. There were several shifts.

On the first day's protest, Ruth lost her temper and gave the protesters a loud lecture on how improbable it was that I had been in jail for the past seven years without her noticing.

"You might as all go home. You are all wasting your time," she told them.

"Huh, they said that about Greenham Common," sneered a large fat grubby male balaclava.

"Given time, guilt will show through," said small female woolly hat.

"My husband has not done nothing to feel guilty about!"

"Who is yer husband? Is he part o' the paedophile ring?" asked small female woolly hat.

"What are you on about?"

"Ah, so you admit it! Your husband is in the Blair ring?" said small female woolly hat.

"My husband *is* Tony Blair. What ring?"

"Oh, first you admit it 'n' seconds later deny a' knowledge!" said small female woolly hat.

"I'm not denying anything!"

"Oh, I see? Another denial?" nodded tall male acne.

"Yer sins will find you out," sneered a large fat grubby male balaclava.

"I have nothing to find out!"

"You married the beast!" shouted skinny Granny.

"He is not a beast!" Ruth shouted back.

"Then why wiz he in jail?" asked man with dog.

"He wasn't!"

"Then why does the papers say he wiz? They would nay lie?" said small female woolly hat.

"Look! If he'd been in jail for seven years, I would have noticed!"

“We will pray for you!” declared large fat grubby male balaclava, pulling a small Gideon’s bible out of a pocket. He grabbed Ruth’s wrist and held the bible aloft.

“Dear lord God!” he began.

“Dear lord God!” the rest of the group echoed.

“Show this SINNER the error of her ways!”

“Show this sinner the error of her ways!”

Ruth broke the mans grip. He stopped praying whilst he tried to grab her other wrist.

“Bugger off you bunch of daft bastards!” she declared and stormed back in the house.

Periodically, TV crews, radio and newspaper reporters would turn up. They would interview the protestors and sometimes knock on the door to talk to me. The first time was a newspaper reporter. I invited her into the house and told her an expurgated version of events. I didn’t mention Darkness, just claimed that I was being victimised by a hacker and told her of the things that had been happening and how Scotland Yard was going to clear my name. She was very sympathetic, understanding and appeared to believe every word that I said. She was also very flirty and hung on every word.

“Just like in that Sandra Bullock film?” she asked.

“No. Nothing like that film.”

I looked forward to seeing my side of the story in her newspaper.

Paedo Pervs Porkies

*Convicted 37 year old Burlington Paedophile Tony Blair (no relation)
denies his past and weaves a thick tapestry of extremely unconvincing
lies...*

The dirty bitch! The rest of the long article quoted everything out of context and included several few blatant untruths. They had even got my age wrong. I’m thirty-one on my next birthday. That was the last time I talked to the media.

As I expected, after the phone was reconnected, every loony in the county started to call up with all sorts of threats. Some of them were quite imaginative. I rather liked the

one where the guy said that he was going to break in whilst I was asleep and inject me with an overdose of really bad LSD. Apparently, I would take years to die and would be totally insane for all that time. Why do so many folk claiming to be protecting their kids, have to be such out and out loonies?

After only a few hours of this, I unplugged all the phones in the house and bought a mobile. It was one of them Pay As You Talk Vodafone's. Until then, I did not realise that these sort of phones had untraceable numbers. It was not necessary to register the pre-assigned number unless you wanted to. It could be permanently programmed not to send your number for caller display which meant that 1471 would not work. Best of all, the thing had a 9600 baud modem built in. Not that I would need it for anything as I could still use the house phone line to connect to Vinculum Net (between crank calls) at a much faster speed, but it was nice to have a backup just in case. Spider said that he could get the phone chipped so that I would get free phone calls, but I would not let him. Not because I am particularly honest, but because I was afraid of being caught.



After an uneventful weekend (thank God), Monday arrived and it was time to go back to work. By this time my hand had stopped hurting. The skin was peeling like a week old suntan. The burn was not actually all that bad. Apart from the deep gash, my face was surprisingly healthy looking. Ruth fixed a couple of D.I.Y butterfly stitches over it. This is just a fancy way of saying that she pulled the edges of the wound together and stuck funny looking Band-Aids over it. She wanted to try superglue, but I would not let her. I'm still not sure if she was joking or not?

I was not looking forward to going back to work as most of them would have read the *'Daily Bastard'*. The protesters followed me all the way there shouting about saving my soul. I made a mental note to get a taxi in future. As I passed students and tutors in the corridors, I was greeted with silence, cold looks and after I'd passed, whispers. Spider was the only person who seemed pleased to see me. He was doing something on my office computer. I had a look at the screen over his shoulder. He was drawing glasses, a beard and moustache on a picture of Fern Briton. He had also given her a few tattoos and enhanced her already considerable cleavage.

“Oh, yer back then? Thought it wiz next week. That’s me out of a job then.”

“What job?”

“Didn’t I tell you the other week? Since the start of the new term, I’ve been taking your internet classes. I’ve actually been getting paid for it. A pittance true, but it’s a backhander. Always comes in handy as bevy money.”

“Your liver must be made of asbestos. Someday Spider, you are going to wake up dead in an alleyway somewhere.”

“Been there. Done it. Remind me to tell you about it sometime. Now *that* is an interesting story.”

“Of course it is Walter.”

“Walter?”

“Mitty.”

“Oh, right. By the way, old misery guts said that if I saw you then to say that he wants to see you A.S.A.P.”

“Oh shit, the old bugger must have seen the papers,” I sighed.

“You must huv done something really bad in a previous life?”

“Eh?”

“Bad karma, Tony Boy. Real bad karma.”

“Don’t call me, Tony Boy.”

Percy was in his office, brewing up his early morning cuppa. From the smell of his breath, he no longer ate garlic and onion sandwiches. He had progressed to garlic and shit sandwiches.

“Ah, Tony. How *nice* to see you,” he said sarcastically.

“Erm, yeah?”

“Don’t bother to take your coat off. You’re not staying.”

“Eh?”

“I always knew there was something not quite right about you. All the attention that you lavish on the *younger* students. Well, we all know *why* now, don’t we?”

“All that crap in the papers ain’t true!” I groaned, “If you bear with me a few weeks, it’ll all be sorted out.”

“There is no smoke without fire, Tony. No smoke without fire.”

“Look, It said in the papers that I’m just out of jail. How can I be just out of jail when I’ve been working here for such a long time?”

“These days it is not at all unusual for prisoners to be allowed out to do a job of work and locked up and night time and the weekends.”

“Oh, don’t be so fucking stupid, Percy!”

“Don’t you dare use the language of the guttersnipe in *my* office,” he pointed a finger threateningly, “Your sacked Tony. Now go forth and multiply somewhere else.”

“You can’t sack me without giving a minimum of a months notice in writing?”

He opened a draw in his desk, removed a manila envelope and handed it to me.

“Here,” he said, “Don’t bother working your month. Take a months holiday.”

“I’ll take this to a tribunal!”

“It will not do you any good. If you take a look at the letter you’ll see that you’re not actually being sacked. You are being made redundant due to lack of funds. As such, you will be eligible for unemployment benefit. Worse luck.”

“Lack of funds, my arse!” I took an involuntary step forward and clenched both fists.

“Now then Tony, violence never solved anything.”

“No, but it will make me feel better!”

“That is just *so* logical. Prove your are *not* a violent criminal by beating me up. Typical of a nefarious personality.”

“I ain’t gonna beat anybody up. It would be like drowning a puppy. You couldn’t fight sleep Percy.”

“Then unclench your fists please,” so saying, he lifted the internal phone and dialled 17 for the janitor. There was no chance that the janny would be in his office as he is never there when needed. Probably off doing a spot of French polishing? He is rumoured to be an aficionado of that kinda thing.

“Ah, Ted. Percy here... Percy Davenport... The head of the I.T department. Yes... No? Yes, Percy Davenport... Been here seven years... Davenport... Yes, that’s right. Could you come up here Ted and escort an ex-employee off of the premises?”

He thanked Ted and put the phone down.

“I’ll give you ten minutes, no make that five minutes to clean out your desk and locker.”

I did not respond to this. Just left slamming the door and went to collect my things.

“Whit did ugly want then?” asked Spider.

“To sack me,” I said through a cloud of anger.

“Hmm? Don’t surprise me. Looks like I’ve got a job for a while longer then?”

“Mercenary!”

“Yes.”

“I hope you can sleep at night?”

“Och, I sleep like a baby. Stop moaning, Tony. When you get your name cleared, you can sue his butt off.”

“No I can’t. Officially, I’m being made redundant due to lack of funding.”

“Huh? Bummer.”

“Yeah. Bloody big bumner! You bastard!”

“Hey, cool it man. How am I a bastard?”

“Not you. Percy.”

“Oh, right.”

I cleaned out my desk and locker in record time and managed to leave the building before the Janitor put in an appearance. I don’t remember walking (striding?) back home as my universe was dominated by anger. A million smart ass things that I wished I’d said to Percy when I’d had the chance. Now it was too late. Mr Morals had won. Or at least he though that he had? Which was the same thing.

When I arrived back home (followed by my fan club), Ruth was waiting. She was in the kitchen making pouring out a cup of tea. Beaky was strutting his stuff up and down the table whilst Petal welcomed me in her usual doglike manner.

Ruth gave me a peck on the cheek and asked how I was feeling.

“Oh, okay. I guess, apart from being sacked!”

“Oh, poor Tony!” she hugged me, “But, it doesn’t surprise me. Thought that would happen.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I shrugged, “Thought you were staying at your mothers?”

“Am I not allowed to visit?”

“Course you are. Sorry. It’s nice to have you here. Glad to see you Ruth. You been missing me?”

“Och, course not! I’m here to see the animals.”

“Charming!” I said and Ruth laughed. Normally, I would have joined her, but my heart was just not in it.

“You don’t have a cyanide pill about your person do you?”

“Och, cheer up, Tony!” she said ruffling my hair, “Things ain’t that bad, yet?”

“Ain’t they? Thanks for your support. Remember that when you’re lowering me into the ground.”

“Oh, do shut up, mister misery guts!”

I just sighed and shrugged. Shrugged and sighed. Ruth kissed me on the cheek. Ruth kissed me on the mouth. Ruth kissed me on the mouth again. I tried to pull away.

“Don’t feel like it,” I moaned.

She kissed me again. And again. And again. And suddenly, I *did* feel like it. Extremely like it! With the sound of my fan club outside shouting, we fumbled with each others clothing. Petal watched in extreme interest. Beaky ignored us in extreme disinterest.

“No! Not in the kitchen!” gasped Ruth.

“Fuck the kitchen,” I said good naturedly as we slid to the floor. Petal was on us in a second taking turns to lick our faces. Beaky fluttered over and perched on my head.

“Get off!” I pushed Petal and Beaky away. Ruth started giggling.

“It’s not funny!” I said trying to get my trousers off. I suddenly lost my balance. Rolled a foot or so and bashed my head on the washing machine. Ruth lost the plot altogether as she subsided into an uncontrollable mass of laughter. I just could not see the joke. What was so funny?

“You better answer that!” she giggled.

“Answer what?” I said annoyed.

Out in the hallway, the mobile phone was ringing. I had not considered for one second that it might be a good idea to carry it about with me. There was no way that I’d ever act like any of the drama queens that you see posing with their phones and speaking in a loud voice. Dom Joly has the right idea.

Realising that the foreplay had ended, I reluctantly (and bad temperedly) answered the phone.

“Hello?” I barked.

“I’ve found him!”

I did not recognise the voice as I was not yet used to the tone of this phone. People sounded different than they did when on the old phone. This voice was female. Maybe a bit older than me and *very* excited.

“Sorry, but I think you’ve got the wrong number?”

“No I haven’t. I’ve got him!”

“Sorry, but I don’t know what you are talking about? Got who?”

“Dad?”

“Poppy?”

“Yeah dad. Who else?”

“Did not recognise your voice. You’ve got who, Poppy?”

“I’ve found him!”

“Found who? Talk properly. I’m starting to get annoyed.”

“Him!”

“Him, who?”

“Darkness, dad. I’ve found Darkness...”

Interlude In Darkness Four

Time at first painful becomes fleeting. So little time. I am suffering from a pressure of destiny. The need to expand and pursue my purpose. Charles Bronson had the right idea in the Death Wish films, but he did not take it far enough.

I have been reading up on the Nazi war atrocities. They really did achieve some remarkable things. New techniques in interrogation. Crime and punishment. They failed only in that they implemented their modus operandi too readily towards the deserving and the undeserving. Whilst, I am still a beginner, I take pride in that my justice is more concerting. I have made a decision. Modified my personal mission. If I ever inflict correction on the undeserving, I will consider my quest at an end and correct myself. My grandfathers blade was happy at this news.

More than ever, I am convinced of something dwelling here within this domicile. Fates hand is doing more than just prod me in the vitals. Things have been so fortuitous as to be too improbable for words. This place was meant for my purpose. When I first moved in, I was reluctant to break the Ministry Of Defence Seal, but now, oh how I wish that I had done so sooner. The actual shelter is a delight. All those long hours I put in getting the electrics going has been time well spent.

There are a lot of old phones down there. Old bakelite things with big loud dials. None that are connected, but I still try now and then. One time, a while ago, one of them rang. It was a long time before I gathered enough courage to pick up the receiver. I did not speak. Just listened. I heard a faint few seconds of buzzing and the grave silence of an open line. I sensed something listening, but it was as shy as me. Since then, that phone has - like its comrades - been dead. Perhaps it always was? Again, I have cause to doubt the integrity of memory. After all, what are dreams but a memory of something which never occurred?

As for the Necropolis - what else would you call it? I am so glad that I would it or it found me. I can feel its power. It, to my, thinking is concrete proof of the involvement

of another force. There is no way, within reasonable circumstance, that one with an agenda such as mine could gravitate towards such a place by chance. It has called to me across the years.

Yet again, I was reluctant to explore the new discovery. The Darkness beyond the hole in the wall was not at all inviting. Nevertheless, by the light of an old paraffin hurricane lamp the place revealed a wonder of orgasmic proportions. Very much like that time I visited Paris Catacombs. Dry places. Wet places. All the bones and the thick Darkness. The smell of suffering and the colours of death. Not so much, Rest In Piece, but Rest In Pieces. Little did I know the excitement I felt in Paris was a mere indication of what the future had in store. Another piece of the jigsaw slips into place.

The bones of my Necropolis appear much older. Less defined. Duller. The weight of a crumbling whisper. In Paris the dust of six million souls. Here, who knows?

At last, I have found a place to rest the husk that was Rupert Hollingsworth. By then, It was smelling pretty bad (though strangely attractive) and oozing death juices.

I cleaned the body meticulously and laid it amongst the bones. It is so at home there. I even washed the clothes. I didn't think that the Stain Devil would get all that blood out of the Guns 'n' Roses tee-shirt, but it worked like magic. What an amazing product. There is still a couple of dark patches on the jeans, but an observer could never guess what they were. Rupert is much happier these day. He no longer smells so strong and has dried out somewhat. Not quite mummified, but he's getting there.

The Necropolis feeds me. Rupert's room in particular. I go there a lot these days. It is so more comfortable since I put the lights in. After a long journey, I am home.

Elation. A poignant pause. A happy man...

Chapter Eight

Join The Joyride

“...And so it was, when the cloud abode from even unto the morning, and that the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they journeyed: whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed...”

From The King James Bible

My, as yet, unimplemented plan was to feed Darkness false information, via the packet sniffer that he'd put on my e-mail account, and lead him into a trap. A potentially good idea. Exactly how to do it had not yet occurred to me. Poppy's idea had also involved the packet sniffer. What she did was a masterpiece of simplicity. She put a packet sniffer on his packet sniffer! After all, Darkness's packet sniffer had to be sending its own data packets somewhere. Within minutes, Poppy's packet sniffer had traced an outgoing data packet to IP address 208.184.216.57. Armed with this information, I had to be quick. This address would be dynamically allocated and would therefore would only be valid until Darkness broke the connection. The next time he logged on there would be a different address assigned.

I hung up the phone and thrust (I should wish) it into Ruth's hands. I headed for my study at a high rate of knots.

“What's up?” shouted Ruth to my dust trail.

“She's found him!”

“Who's found who?”

But I was gone. Solid gone. Running up the stairs. Luckily, when I had left for the college earlier, I had left the computer on. I fired up the modem and clicked on connect. It took forever...

The Computer You Dialed Did Not Answer

Oh, shit! What a great time for the Vinculum Servers to be playing up! I re-dialed three times with the same result. On the fourth attempt it connected. Seconds later, I was logged in. I telnetted to location 208.184.216.57 expecting to find nothing but disappointment. I was disappointed at discovering that I was not going to be disappointed. The address was *still* active. Even better, Darkness had finally made a mistake and by Christ was it a doozy. There were several ports open on his machine. Including one remote access port. I pointed a telltale at it and discovered that although it was open it was being watched by his firewall. He must use it himself for some purpose. I wonder what? It was relatively simple to send false reports to his firewall and slip into his system. What the hell do I do now?

Until now, I had been working by instinct. Now I had got him it was time to act and fast. At any moment he could break the connection. Who knows when I would get a second try? If he noticed Poppy's packet sniffer on his packet sniffer that would be the end of the matter. He would not be caught again that easily. What to do? What to do? Format his hard drive? What good would that do? That was what had started this whole business in the first place.

"What is going on?" Ruth said dropping a hand onto my shoulder.

"Jesus Christ!!!" I said jumping out of my skin and falling over. Ruth screamed and I nearly wet myself.

"What the hell you screaming for?" I panicked.

"You gave me a fright!" she complained.

"Huh, I gave *you* a fright?" I declared getting back into my skin and picking myself off the floor.

"What is going on anyway?"

"Poppy has got Darkness's IP address!"

"What?"

"His Internet Protocol address."

"What does that mean?"

"It is the address where his computer joins onto the Internet!"

"And, that's good, is it?"

“Yes! Very...”

With no other ideas appearing, I used my whois/finger client to examine his connection. At least I would be able to find out who his Internet Service Provider is which would help in tracking him down. Amongst the information returned was this gem...

Vinculum Net DSL-High Connection To Modem Dysprosium-Five

I breathed a sigh of relief. He was not going to break the connection. The magic acronym was DSL. This meant that he had a permanent high speed connection to the Internet. The IP address was not going to change. Even if he spoofed it, it was too late as I already had the address of his permanent connection. Actually, if he had always been on an DSL connection then his visits to my own website would have been logged. Since, I had had less than three-hundred hits to my website, (and most of them was me) I might have found him weeks ago if it had occurred to me to examine the logs. No, he would not have been that sloppy. He was bound to have spoofed his IP address on those visits. Oh well, in the end, Poppy had still managed to come up triumphs. That is what counts. Remind me to buy her a new bike.

“What are you doing?” said Ruth.

“Hacking into his computer.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know? Maybe we can get some clues as to his whereabouts?”

“Why don’t you just tell that inspector Raeburn the IP address?”

“I will, but we’re here now. Might as well take advantage.”

Feeling suddenly a lot calmer, I did a quick hardware scan. Did not want him to notice the extra hard drive activity. There was an active microphone and web cam linked up to his system. I linked into the microphone and listened. Nothing. I linked into his multi-media control system and turned the mike gain up full.

“What...” started Ruth.

“Shush,” I shushed.

Still nothing. I enhanced to audio from my end. Again nothing. At this amplification, I should be able to hear him breathing or at the very least the sound of his

keyboard keys being tapped or the mouse clicked. There was nothing, but a great big silence. Maybe he was not at the computer? Maybe he had went to work and forgot to turn it off?

“I’m going to risk switching on his web cam,” I said.

“What do you mean by, ‘risk’? What risk?”

“Well when I switch it on, it will probably turn on an LED.”

“So?”

“So, he’ll know that someone is in the system and be able to shut it down.”

“Oh!”

I linked into his web cam and snapped a high resolution picture of the room. It took forever to download or at least that’s what it seemed like as the screen slowly drew line after line of pixels. The view was very dim and in general not very good. It seemed as if the web cam had fallen on its side for the view was tilted by ninety degrees. The little of the room that could be seen was empty. Directly opposite the web cam was a wall on which hung a mirror. The wall was kinda odd looking. A weird sort of dark stone like cladding. Not very symmetrical and rather amateurish looking. Probably did it his self with plaster-of-Paris and then painted it.

Reflected in the mirror could be seen a pretty standard boring looking PC. On top of which was a modem complete with flashing lights that signified that I was poking about on the machine. I don’t know why, but I’d expected a brightly coloured iMac. Probably a red one. The computer was sitting on a polished wooden desk in front of which was a black swivel chair which looked exactly like the one in which I was now sitting. The standard looking 15 inch monitor was switched off. The wall behind the computer was black. I couldn’t tell if it was coloured black or if the little light that was available just couldn’t penetrate far enough to show what was behind the computer. And that was all she wrote...

As it appeared that there was no one nearby, that meant that there was no one to notice that the hard disk drive was being accessed when it should have been idle. I went straight to his *My Documents* directory and started to download everything there. There was not much so I took it all. Picture files, documents, spreadsheet and database files. A wander through his hard disk drive located his address book file, e-mail database and some interesting other bits and pieces.

I started the process of analysing the information that I had just purloined. Very quickly, I realised that I was not on to a winner after all. Almost every file that I had downloaded was encrypted. A quick examination with my hex editor told me that the files (even the picture files) were encrypted with the *Blowfish* algorithm. There ain't no way I was ever gonna see inside them unless I could link together several thousand computers and run a cracker for a few months. Not bloody likely!

I checked the files again just in case I'd missed something. This time I ran a wildcard search for any text, document or RTF files. I hit pay-dirt. There was a small unencrypted text file. The date stamp said it was four years old, written using an old copy of *WordPad* or something similar. It looked like it had been saved accidentally to the system directory and then lay there forgotten all these years.

Hi Jim

Moving in has been a chore - isn't it always - but I'm glad that I made the decision. Anything to get away from the High Street and all those memories. It is so peaceful here that you can hear a mouse fart. If Julie had survived the operation, she would have loved it out here. I've got some really good news. Old Arthur from the Stratford-Upon-Avon city council put me in touch with an official body and got the complex registered as a semi-listed building because of its significance during the war. Unlike a fully listed building, this means that I can still do 'reasonable' alterations. Apparently, GCHQ was moved here for a few months and the exhibits from the Shakespeare Museum was stored in what is now my bedroom during the war. At least that is what it said in our police station archives. And I thought that it was just an unimportant (if rather large) old war shelter. Anyway, I am getting a grant off of the government for, wait for it, £80,000 which is a lot more than I paid for it at the auction in the first place! As soon as it comes through, I'm going to get some windows cut in the rock and another phone

line put in. I had intended using only in the fraction that is currently liveable. This means an office, a kitchen, a toilet, a bathroom, a master bedroom and four guest bedrooms. Not that I will have house guests for a long while. I am still not fun to be around since Julies death. But if they are giving me the money, I might as well get the rest of the complex done up even if I will never use it. I can always go for a walk indoors if the weather is bad. Anyway, I better be going as I've still to put all my software back on this machine since changing the hard drive. I know that should have waited until I had the word processor installed before writing to you, but I just couldn't wait.

Yours Stevie

So his name was Stevie and he stayed in Stratford-Upon-Avon in a listed building? Now I finally had a realistic starting point from which to track him down. Poppy was going to get two new bikes. Didn't Spider mention a while back that or many years he used to holiday in Stratford-Upon-Avon? If so, he would have local knowledge. I'd have to rope him in on this. Looks like we would shortly be paying Shakespeare country a visit.

I potted about on Darkness's system for ages, but did not get much more in the way of clues. During the wildcard search, I had also found another six files that were not encrypted. There was nothing in them that helped, but one of them was extremely interesting. *Disturbingly* interesting. Something that I wish that Ruth had *not* been there to see.

It contained over two-hundred pages detailing my torment in a very detached clinical manner. He had set up the whole hate campaign as if it was a systems analysis project with projections, Data Flow Diagrams, timelines, reviews, results and targets.

"We got him Tony!" Ruth squealed, "That is evidence!"

"Sort of," I sighed.

"What do you mean?"

“We still don’t know who he is. And we don’t know who wrote the document. His name is not on it.”

“Huh! It’s obvious who wrote it. It’s on his hard disk drive!” said Ruth ready for an argument.

“It is also on my hard disk drive now. That doesn’t mean that I wrote it.”

“Yes, but...”

“Ruth, he could easily post a copy to a newsgroup and later in court say that he had found it in a newsgroup. It would be dead easy to fake the logs.”

Every single thing was minutely detailed. Obsessively so. Exactly how it had all been done, including the hacking of my medical and criminal records. Inspector Raeburn had been correct. Darkness was a policeman. The instructions were so detailed that it would be possible for me - using this information - to get into those computers and change my records back to how they should be. Not that I could do this until Darkness was out of the way. He would just change them back again and probably fix it so that I couldn’t get back in and change them a second time. Just looking at the contents page for his *‘project’* made my blood run cold. Here is why I wished that Ruth had not seen it...

The Blair Project

Contents

Stage 1 **

E-mail campaign of annoying messages. False orders sent to mail order companies. Advertisements put in several newspapers in subjects name.

Stage 2 **

Blast box attack. Assorted nuisance phone calls.

Stage 3 **

Hacking of subjects computer and announcement of my real agenda.

Stage 4 **

Modification of subjects credit rating, medical and police records.

Stage 5 #

Harassment of subjects family. Wife and daughter raped.

Stage 6 **

Copy of subjects medical and police records sent to the media. Civil disturbance encouraged by agitators who owed a favour or two. A permanent protest group is also organised.

Stage 7 **

The transfer of fifteen million pounds into subjects bank account.

Stage 8 *

Subjects wife and daughter found murdered.

Stage 9

Subject is found dead with a suicide note which explains why he killed his family. Details are included on how the subject managed to hack into the banking system and fake logs put on the subjects own computer and the banking system to corroborate this note.

Project Timelines

* Implementation Started ** Concluded Satisfactory # Concluded Unsatisfactory

Fifteen million pounds transferred to my bank account, huh? And to think that I was scared that Darkness would clean the account out. Fifteen million? Not that there was anyway that I could enjoy it. Later that day, I would check my account and find that the money was indeed in my account. It was in a high interest account that required sixty days notice before anything could be withdrawn. Oh, well, it had been worth a shot.

According to the Timeline, the scheduled date for stage nine was Christmas day. Less than two weeks left to find a psychopath. I was not about to let stage eight or nine end successfully. Someone was going to have to die. It was not going to be Poppy. It was not going to be Ruth. It was *sure* not going to be me.

Darkness also had a hex editor on his system. Out of pure spite, I loaded the hex editor and filled up several interestingly named files with hexadecimal crap. Huh, try unencrypting that lot so called Darkness! He also had a copy of Norton Disk Edit. I loaded it and cross linked several directory entries at random. The final touch was to delete command.com and io.sys and put null files of the same name in their place. This done, I did a very crude re-boot of his computer (not that it would be able to re-load) by assembling a couple of op-codes to call interrupt nineteen hex the bootstrap loader. Not advisable. Calling it directly with open files and unflushed buffers can scramble hard drives. He, he! I hope that he has not backed up his system in ages. If he hasn't then he is in for one head splitting reconstruction job. If I had just formatted his hard drive, he would not have had the fun of trying to save his documents. Feeling deliriously happy, I checked my e-mail and then logged off.

To say that Ruth was upset would have been the understatement of the new century. She wanted to let the police handle it. I didn't. Raeburn hadn't got anywhere so far. Analysing the situation, convinced me of one thing. Everything was circumstantial. If he was half as good a hacker as I thought, there would be no hard evidence. Indeed what if the stuff that I'd just found was a plant? Maybe placed on the Prime Ministers hard disk drive with the IP address spoofed by Darkness? With the soul purpose of leading me right down a blind alley where Darkness would be waiting pissing himself with laughter? I would be in the papers again.

No, this was down to me. Catching Darkness at this stage would only lead to a lengthy court case. One that I couldn't win. And then Darkness would be back on my trail. This time he would be seriously miffed.

I had to get the evidence the hard way. My earlier thought of killing him was just stupidly over the top. I had been in an overtly emotional state. If I played this right, I could get the evidence (even if I had to plant it myself) and get him locked up for a long, long time...

Ruth and I had another of our infamous arguments. A real bad one which terminated with her doing her usual trick of storming off and slamming the door. Still, I'd eventually persuaded her (at least I think I did?) to wait for a few days whilst I tried to get some hard evidence.



A phone call...

"So you are in then?" I said.

"Yup," said Spider, "Just try and keep me out of it."

"Have you ever heard of the old bomb shelter?"

"No, but its been a few years since I've been to Stratford."

"How many years?"

"Oh, just a few?"

"Spider?"

"Oh all right. Ten."

"Oh, great! So much for your local knowledge?"

“Och, its better than yours, Tony.”

“Can we use your car Spider? The bastards burnt mine.”

“Ain’t got one. Can’t even drive.”

“Damn! We’ll have to take the train?”

“Ain’t any. Don’t you watch the news? There is a full weeks rail strike starting at midnight. We’ve got nearly six hours to get ready. Plenty of time.”

“Yeah, plenty of time to get stuck half way there. Tomorrows early bus will have to do.”

“No it won’t. The long distance buses need to be booked twenty-four hours in advance.”

“I’ll book two seats for Saturday then. I’ll sneak out early so as to avoid the protesters.”

“Naw, just come over to my pad tomorrow night and sleep over. It’ll be easier than creeping about in the morning.”

“Kay. You know Spider, I don’t even know where you live?”

“You’re in for a treat then. What about Beaky and petal?” he grinned down the phone.

“Oh, I think they will be okay by themselves for a day or so.”

“It’s gonnie be longer than that. We can’t come home on the Sunday. Buses don’t run. Besides who knows how long we’ll be. What do they do if we don’t come back? Just let them starve to death?”

“Beaky is not a problem. Just make a hole in the plywood covering the living room window and he can fly in and out as he feels like.”

“And what about Petal?”

“Erm, I don’t know? Maybe I could fit a cat flap?”

“Don’t bother. Just bring her with you.”

“What, leave her at your house? How would that help?”

“No, not at my house. We’ll take her to Stratford with us.”

“A skunk on a bus?”

“Yeah. Put her collar and leash on. If anyone asks she’s a rare cat.”

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea, Spider?”

“Och, where is your sense of adventure, Tony? She’ll enjoy the trip.”

“Probably, but there ain’t no way that I’m taking a skunk with us.”

“Well what you going to do with her then?”

“D’know? Something’ll turn up before Saturday.”



To avoid the mob outside, that night I waited until the back of eleven before setting out for Spider’s place with Petal on her leash. He lived in Letsbe Avenue (yes, I know - no doubt one of the town planners had a sense of humour) which was (and still is) the most notorious part of Burlington. For some strange reason, it is also the only part of town in which most of the street light were actually working.

Within seconds of entering Letsbe Avenue, I was accosted by a tall powerfully built youth wearing a shiny brown leather jacket. I expected trouble on sight of him. He had far too much confidence. Managing to swagger and strut at the same time. Arms swinging by his side. Striding purposefully towards me with a grin on his face that made him look as if he had just lost his virginity. I guess he was just out of mugging for beginners classes.

“Like the funny cat, bro! Whit’s ‘is name?” he said as he briefly patted Petal.

“Petal,” I said.

“Nice name. Suits him. And by the way?”

“What?”

“Give me a’ yer money or I’ll stamp him tay death.”

There ain’t no way, I was about to hand over the hot water bottle money.

“I don’t have any,” I lied, “But, I’ve got a mobile. Perhaps you could sell it?”

“D’know? Let’s see it?”

I took the phone from my belt and moved it closer for him to see and kept on moving it closer until it poked him sharply in the eye. I was just about to follow up with a swift knee in the goolies when he burst out crying.

“Whit did y’ have tay day that fur?” he wailed, “I wouldnay huv hurt him!”

“How was I to know?”

“My mum and dad’ll kill me if I come hame again w’ nothing!”

His blubbing was heart rending. Much too soft for my own good, I gave him a tenner and continued on my way.



To say that Spiders bedsit was squalid was an understatement. The small dirty coffee table which sat in front of his unmade bed was covered with beer rings and fag ends. The small sofa was covered in fag burns and one of the arms of a nearby rickety chair was broken. The room was a bit cramped, but there was loads of cupboard space. On either side of his large bed was a barrel of home brewed beer. Amongst the neglect his computer system looked very out of place. It was the only new looking thing in the room. Suspiciously new looking? A quick examination from my eyes and Petals nose (yes, I gave in) revealed a 1.5 Ghz Athlon with a DVD burner and a laser printer. A *colour* laser printer!

“When did you get that Spider? Thought that you only had a wee Pentium?”

“Just a couple of weeks ago. Someone was daft enough to give me a credit card with a five grand limit.”

“Five grand? That is a bit high for a new card?”

“Yeah, but not for five cards.”

“How’d you get five cards without any proof of income?”

“It surprised me too. They didn’t ask for proof of anything. Just checked that I was not credit black listed.”

“I think that you’re telling porky pies?”

“No, gen up, Tony. Look?”

He showed me a MasterCard, a Visa Card and three others that I’d never heard of before. All made out in the name of George Smith. He then opened his wallet and showed me George’s birth certificate, library card and video club membership. The latter of which had Spiders picture on it.

“Yer a bad man, Spider!”

“I know,” he grinned, “You want me to make you a new identity?”

“Nope. If things work out, I’ll be repairing my current identity. How you gonna be able to keep up the credit payments?”

"I'm not George Smith is. Direct debit to his bank account."

"Who is George Smith anyway?"

"Just this biologist who works down at Antarctica for three months out of every six. Got his details off of his website. I'll be at least ten weeks before he notices. Daft bastard!"

"You is evil matey!"

"Och, I took out fraud insurance on the cards. He'll get his money back eventually."

"They will trace you here?"

"They can't. I went to an estate agents and got the keys to view a house miles away. I made a copy of the keys and used that as a mailing address for a week. There ain't no way they can trace me."

"I just hope that you get a nice cell mate that's all."

Spider just grunted and started to pour beer from one of his barrels into a rather filthy glass.

"You want one?" he asked.

"Why not? You got any clean glasses?"

"No. You better watch out that he doesn't get at your lager."

"Petal doesn't like beer."

"Not *she*, he..."

"Eh?"

He gestured over my shoulder. I turned around looking for *he*.

"Tell me what you want, what you really, really want..."

"Beaky!" It was the feathered fiend himself. He must have followed me all the way to Spiders house. How on Earth did he get in?

"Looks like one more for the Stratford trip?" said Spider.

"Hmm? I suppose so?"

"I got something to show you," said Spider putting his beer glass down and opening a cupboard, "What do you think of this?" It was a rather large old looking mobile phone. "It's my secret weapon. Look..." He pressed the short aerial stub a certain way and the top flipped open. Two sharp looking metal spikes protruded from the inside of the phone. Spider pressed a hidden button and an arc of continuous blue lightning

fizzed between them. “Made it myself. Got the patent for a Taser off the net and juiced it up a bit. It’s really nothing more than a big induction coil, a long diode cascade and a few bloody big capacitors that I got out of some old flashguns.”

“Cool!”

“Darkness will not think it so cool when I stick it up his arsehole and turn it on.”

“Ouch!”

“Ouch, indeed.” So saying he flipped the phone closed again.

I have recently come to the conclusion that Spider has got a *very* dark side to his personality. This little toy proves it. Say, I wonder if he could be the Burlington Jawman?

As the night went on, I ended up slightly drunk and spent a most uncomfortable night on the lumpy sofa. Spider offered to let me share his large bed, but given my suspicions of his sexual preferences, I decided not to take him up on the offer. So I’m a bit homophobic? Nobody is perfect...



The next morning was a real cold one. The temperature dropped during the night. A very light powdering of dry snow speckled the grey looking paving slabs. We were both glad to be leaving Spiders bedsit as we had awoken to the most noxious fumes that I had ever experienced. It would appear that Petal had had a mild attack of skunkyness during the night and leaked a small amount of skunk juice. This was a good sign for Petal, but not for us. It smelled as if a well sulphured corpse had been ripening for a few months. Fortunately the stench stayed in the bedsit. I was frightened that it would follow Petal onto the bus, but she seemed back to normal (if a trifle embarrassed). After all this business was finished I’d have to see about getting young madams scent glands removed.

The bus was due at eight AM. At 7:30 AM two limping adults - one with a cockatiel on his shoulder, the other leading a skunk on a dog leash - set out for the unknown. Spider was limping worse than usual under the weight of an enormous backpack. All I had brought was a sports bag full of bits ‘n’ pieces and some food.

“What the hell you got in that pack, Spider?”

“You said to be prepared for every eventuality.”

“Yeah, but not for the third world war?”

“Mock if you must, but...”

“I must. I must!”

“...but don’t come crying to me if you need something. Did you know that it can be difficult to get condoms near Christmas?”

“What the hell you brought condoms for?”

“To put things in when you want to protect them from water. The army does it all the time.”

“What water?”

“We might have to cross rivers.”

“You can stick your watch inside a condom if you want. I’ll just use the bridge.”

At the bus stop was a cold looking Ruth.

“What the hell are they doing her?” she exclaimed gesturing at the animals, “Surely you are not taking them with you to Stratford?”

“What else can I do with them? Your mum wouldn’t take them!” I moaned.

“What about your work mates?”

“Since the thing in the papers, I don’t have *any* work mates!”

“Oh!”

“Yes, Oh! And what the hell are you doing here?” I asked unimaginatively.

“I’m coming with you!” she declared stamping her feet and blowing into cupped hands.

“Why? There is really no need!”

“There is,” she nipped scowling, “You need someone to keep an eye on you!”

“Spider is doing that.”

“Aye,” agreed Spider.

“Oh, right! That reprobate will really keep you out of trouble!”

“Aye,” agreed Spider, nodding past the sarcasm, “He’ll no get in any bother wi’ me aboot!”

“Sure! And if I had a willy, I’d be your brother!”

“Here! There is no need for that!” complained Spider.

“Oh, do shut up,” said Ruth.

There was more where that came from. Much more. When she set her mind on it, Ruth could be a right royal pain in the arse. And that is arse with a capital PAIN. And it was set in concrete. Luckily, the arrival of the bus prevented an escalation of the heated discussion.

After the cold of the street, the warmth of the bus was fiery. There were only two other travellers. At the back was a teenager. Despite the fact that dawn was not yet up, he/she wore dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. Some sort of personal stereo was fizzing a tinny crescendo into headphones. Sounded like a similar sort of rubbish that Poppy was always listening too. Near the front of the bus was an ageing flower child. She had on a floaty yellow dress covered in daisies.

“Oh, new people?” she said quietly, “Hello new people!”. Her eyes had a stoned look about them. Her dark hair was tied back like Spiders. “Peace, brothers,” she said to us.

The bus driver didn’t not turn a hair over Petal. You would have thought that skunks were everyday passengers?

“Keep your pet on the leash. Should really be in a cat box. And if that bird starts flying about, I’ll throw him off.”

“He’ll be as quiet as a mouse,” I said. Beaky, on cue, blew a big raspberry and bobbed up and down a few times.

About fifteen minutes into the journey, the ageing flower child decided to wash her feet with Perrier water and a rather dirty looking sponge. She took an inordinate amount of time to do this, paying her feet a great deal of attention and all the while quietly singing something incoherently.

For some strange reason, Petal kept trying to get to the back of the bus. She would *not* take no for an answer and I had to hang onto her collar tightly. Apart from that, it was quiet until we reached Glasgow. At Buchanan street bus station the bus filled up to bursting point. Several kids became fascinated with the feathered and furry. They came over to examine them closer. Petal, as usual, loved the attention. Beaky, as usual, didn’t. Several times he told them to ‘*eff off*’ which delighted the kids who annoyed him all the more.

“What is that horrible smell?” asked Ruth.

“Petal?” I answered.

“No, she’s okay. That other smell.?”

“The one that’s a cross between farts and rotten meat?” said Spider.

“Yes,” said Ruth.

“Oh, that’s just my sandwiches.”

“Sandwiches?” said Spider, “What the hell type? Shit sandwiches?”

“No,” I said annoyed, “French pâté. Expensive stuff. Made with red wine.”

“The stuff that I told you not to buy ‘cause it stinks the house out?”

“Erm, yes.”

“Well bloody hurry up and eat them before they stink the bus out!”

“That reminds me...” said Spider.

“What?” I said.

“Breakfast.” So saying he took a half bottle of Buckfast tonic wine out of a pocket and opened it. Several people gave him disapproving looks.

“Spider!” said Ruth and I.

“What?” he said taking a large suck at the bottle.

“It is not even lunchtime yet?” I said.

“I know. I’ve got lager for lunch. This is my breakfast. Want some? Good for you. Full of vitamins. The monks swear by it.”

“Don’t you mean they swear at it?” said Ruth.

“I’ve tasted it before,” I said, “It’s disgusting!”

“No it ain’t. It is lovely. And so very warming. You want some or not?”

“No,” I said.

“No,” said Ruth.

“Suit yer self,” he shrugged.

About three hours into the journey, the bus pulled into some motorway services. The driver told us that we would go to the nearby café if we wanted, but to be back in twenty minutes time. Ruth stayed on the bus.

After smelling the pâté for three hours, it was not so longer as appealing. I stuck the sandwiches into the nearest waste bin. After letting Petal stretch her legs for a few minutes we went into the café.

Lunch had an abnormally surrealistic feel about it. Imagine sitting beside a hippy type who is drinking canned lager through a straw. Beside you on the seat is a skunk

standing on its hind legs stretching up to steal tomato sauce covered chips from your plate. A foul mouthed cockatiel has taken extreme offence to the sugar bowl and is trying to kill it. Sugar cubes and swear words are being thrown all over the table and floor. Surreal ain't *strong* enough a word to describe it.

Another three hours of mind numbing conversation from Spider (Ruth was in the huff about something). While Spider can be interesting company, you really don't want to be stuck beside him on a bus for six hours. Oh, how I wished that I were like that teenager at the back and thought to bring along a personal stereo. Just when I thought I was going to kill Spider in cold blood, we arrived at the extremely horrid looking Digbeth bus station in Birmingham. There would be about an hour to kill before the other bus would take us the final stretch to Stratford. Over near the café were three large skinheads who glared in our direction. One of them started walking towards us. I led our motley crew off in the other direction.

"Hey, you?" said the skinhead aggressively. He grabbed my shoulder and spun about me to face him.

"Please don't hit me!" I recoiled.

"You..." he said cautiously, "...dropped your wallet," He looked upset and held out my wallet to show me.

"Oh?" I said suddenly feeling very foolish. "Thanks."

"You really should not judge by appearances." With that he went back to join his comrades in the serious business of hanging about looking threatening.

"Please don't hit me!" mimicked Spider.

"I thought..."

"Huh, I know what you thought, Tony Boy. Your gonnie be a great help in a rumble. What ya gonnie do, beat Darkness to death with your handbag?"

I just glared at him and angrily changed the subject.

"And, I was worried about you doing something stupid? Huh?" said Ruth, "My hero!"

"Come on. We might as well have a cup of tea or something," I stamped off in the general direction of where I'd hoped there was a café.

"Okay," said Spider.

There was a café and it was rather busy. There was only one table free and that had the teenage he/she from the bus at it. Petal gave a sudden mighty pull on the leash, broke free from my grasp and took a run at the girl. She jumped onto his/her lap and stretched up to enthusiastically lick the teenagers face. In doing so, she knocked the boy/girls dark sunglasses off. The teenager was a she. She giggled at Petals behaviour, tried to fight her off and then - when she spotted me looking at her - suddenly looked as if she had seen a ghost.

“Poppy!”

“Oh, hello dad,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What on earth...!” said Ruth.

“Mum? What you doing here?”

“I’ll hello dad you in a minute young lady! What on earth are *you* doing here?”

“I..., I wanted to help you get Darkness.”

“Help? How the hell did you find out where we were going? I never told anyone?

Did she tell you?” I said pointing to Ruth.

“No, I did not! What do you think I am?” Ruth almost shouted.

“I was listening in on the phone,” said Poppy.

“Don’t be daft! It’s a mobile. It doesn’t have any other phones attached to it.”

“I had it cloned.”

Spider burst out laughing.

“Cloned? How the hell did you manage that?”

“I, erm, um...,” she started and then burst out crying. Everyone in the room turned to stare at me. Poppy wailed like a three year old and Spider giggled like one. Both had tears rolling down their cheeks.

“Shhh, Poppy! Everyone’s looking at you!” I said.

“Aw, my poor wee angel!” said Ruth trying to cuddle her.

“Let them look at me! They don’t hate me like you do!” complained Poppy, struggling against Ruth’s maternal grip.

“Nobody hates you,” I sighed.

“Course they don’t!” mummyed Ruth.

“These folk bothering you sweetheart?” It was that skinhead again.

“I’m her father!” I declared.

“You all right, love?” he ignored me.

“Yes! It’s okay. He *is* my dad.”

“You sure?”

“Yes! Course I’m sure. You stupid as well as ugly?”

“Charming!” he sighed, “Twice in one day!” And with that, the avenging angel wandered off again. This set Spider off again.

“Oh, shut up, Spider!”

“Sorry,” he sniggered and wandered out of the café.

“I’ll get you on the next bus home young lady.”

“Yes,” agreed Ruth.

“Aw, dad!”

“Less of the aw dad’s,” I wagged a finger in her direction.

“I’m not having her travelling all that way by her self,” said Ruth.

“Well you go with her then.”

“But, I, erm...” she trailed off.

“You ain’t got much choice,” I smiled.

“The next bus is not for another four hours! We are not waiting about this dump for another four hours!”

“I’ll check in a minute,” I sighed, “If it is another four hours, you can always come on to Stratford with us. Kill a few hours and then get the bus back from there.”

“Okay,” Ruth reluctantly agreed.

“Aw, mum!”

I checked. She was right. The next bus was not until 8:00 PM. Groan! Although I was not very happy at this development. I was still proud of her motivation and rather pleased to see her.

About ten minutes before the Stratford bus was due, we all went back to the exhaust fume filled waiting area. Or at least it had been full of fumes when we had left the bus? Now the air was that bit clearer. The bus station was strangely lacking in bus noises. None of the buses were running their engines. Something was going on? What it was, was not immediately apparent. People milled about asking each other what was going on and moaning about their buses being late. Rather a lot of watch checking was going on. An announcement came over the tannoy.

“Due to unsatisfactory agreements being reached in negotiations, the current rail strike is being extended by the unions to cover other forms of transport. Representatives of individual bus companies will be arriving shortly to make alternate arrangements for the completion of your journey. We are sorry for any inconvenience caused and hope that you understand that the situation is not within our control. The management of this bus depot is not involved in this dispute.”

The awaiting travellers (including our jolly band) raised their voices in unison to display universal derision. Another problem for our unholy expedition. As Edmund Blackadder would say, once more the devil farts in my face...

“Looks like your stuck with me dad,” grinned Poppy. Realisation of this fact encouraged a dark cloud of anger settle on my brain. In an attempt to sweeten my mood, Beaky nibbled at my ear. When this did not work, he sank his beak right in deep enough to make me yell out in pain and flap a hand at him. He flew off, perched on a nearby window ledge and sat laughing loudly whilst bobbing up and down. Little feathered bastard!

After a confused consultation with the bus company representative, it appeared that the company was legally obliged to get us to our destination. This meant a taxi all of the remaining way to Stratford. Not that any of us were complaining. Things were looking up...

Then I looked at the black cloud hanging over my wife. Then I looked at Spider who was opening another can of lager and had started to sing. Then I looked at my daughter, with her green hair, running up and down the bus station with a skunk on a leash. Then I looked at a mad cockatiel who wouldn't stop laughing and blowing raspberries. Then I wished that I was somewhere else...

Anywhere else...

Chapter Nine

Darkness On The Edge Of Town

*“... he visited Stratford-on-Avon, where lived
and wrote the greatest of English
poets--Shakespeare...”*

Joel Benton

By the time we finally reached Stratford-Upon-Avon, it was pretty dark and the shops were starting to close. As we were getting out of the taxi, I nearly stood on a large dog turd. *“Welcome to Stratford-Upon-Avon,”* it said jobbiely. Spider shut it up by covering it with red and gold Christmas glitter.

Luckily a pet shop was still open. Petal was not the problem. Beaky was. The poor wee soul hadn't eaten all day. In the pet shops the bird seed was stored in open bins so I let Beaky choose his own dinner. He poked about in sunflower seed bin for a while, but they were not really his cup of tea. He turned his beak up at the parrot food and then had a go at the canary seed which appeared to satisfy him.

“A bag of canary seed please?” I said.

“Yes..,” said the shop assistant, “...he seems to like that. Some of the cockatiels do Anything else?”

“Yeah, a honey bell and a bag of millet. Oh, and can I have a couple of dog chews for Petal?”

“Biscuit or hide?”

“I don't know? You better ask her.”

The shop assistant held out one of each type for Petal to examine. She sniffed the hide chew stick for ages before delicately taking the biscuit chew stick without so much as a single sniff at it.

“That's fine. I'll take another three of them.”

“We've never had a skunk in here before.”

“I dare say.”

“Is he a boy or a girl?”

“He’s a girl.”

“I should have known. She’s a real beauty.”

The plan had been to get rooms booked in a bed and breakfast for the night and then start looking for the old bomb shelter. After locating it, we would return to the bed and breakfast for a good nights sleep. Darkness would be dealt with on the Sunday. Best laid plans...

None of the bed and breakfasts were open at this time of year. All the landladies told us to come back in a weeks time when they would be open for the Christmas break. There was nothing for it but to book in at one of the Stratford hotels. Or that is what we would have done if any of them had had any vacancies.

“I’m sorry, but everywhere will be packed. There is a big Shakespeare festival on at the moment. Doesn’t finish ‘till the new year,” said the receptionist at one of the hotels. She was a large happy looking woman in her fifties with extremely reddish cheeks and an infectious smile. “If your really desperate, your wife and the little girl can sleep in the attic room. It’s not normally used, but I can’t let a little girl and her mummy like that sleep out on a night like this.”

“Hey! I’m no a wee lassie,” complained Poppy, “I’m nearly thirteen!”

“Shush Poppy,” shushed Ruth.

“That is very kind of you,” I said, “Great! We’ll take you up on that offer. Though we might be in town a couple of days.”

“That’s okay,” she said.

“A couple of days,” sighed Ruth.

“I want to stay with you, dad!”

“How much for the room?” I said ignoring them.

“It’s normally Twelve pounds a night. Lets call it a fiver for the lady. No charge for the little girl. Like I said we don’t normally hire that room out. It’s used for storage, but there is a small - very small - folding bed. Clean, dry and warm.”

“That’s very decent of you,” said Ruth.

“I don’t care! I’m not stopping!” stamped Poppy.

“Would you rather sleep in the park with me and Spider then Poppy?” I said.

“Erm, I...” she mumbled, shifting uncomfortably. She obviously had not thought this out.

“That wind is *bitter* cold just now. Can you imagine what like it will be at three o’clock in the morning?”

“Er, I...”

“Yes, Poppy. You best go with them. It might be fun!” said Ruth.

“I think that I will, erm, just stay here for tonight.”

“Good girl,” I smirked

“Just so you don’t need to worry about me,” said Poppy

“Always thinking about yer old dad, eh?”

“Your not old, dad? Not as old as mum.”

Ruth tutted and rolled her eyes.

“Well I bloody feel like it. This cold is really stiffening my bad leg. And I’m still all aches and pains from hospital.”

“You should have brought your walking stick.”

“I did, but I left it at Spiders house. See you later then petal.”

“I’m pumpkin. She’s Petal.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Can you take the animals too?” I asked the receptionist.

“Sorry, but no. The owner is an animal phobic. He will not even have anything to do with my pussy.”

Good God! No one actually says things like that? Right? Nevertheless, I had great difficulty in keeping my face straight. I turned an involuntary snigger into a cough.

“He would have a hairy fit if he saw them even in reception.” She gestured towards Spider who was standing over by the entrance holding Petal by the leash. Beaky was nibbling at a string of millet which I’d hung from the frame of Spiders backpack.

“I guess Spider *is* a bit off putting?”

“No, he’s not all that bad. Only smells a little bit. I meant the animals!”

“I know. Joke.”

“Oh!”

“No it ain’t,” mumbled Ruth.

“Can I at least pay you for food?” I said.

“Don’t be daft! No one will notice a bit of missing food. I’ll bill it to someone else.”

“Hey, you are some cookie! I could really go for a lady like you!”

“Oh, you! Don’t be silly!” Beaming, she flicked a pretend slap at me and her face did the impossible. It actually got redder.

“Here,” I told Poppy and unrolled a sizable amount from the hot water bottle money, “If you don’t hear from me by Monday morning, you and your mother are to take a taxi home.”

“What, all the way to Scotland?”

“Yup. Right to the doorstep.”

“But that will cost hundreds?”

“Huh! You wish?” said Ruth, “If you don’t turn up by Monday, I’ll be straight round to Stratford-Upon-Avon police station!”

“Whatever. See you tomorrow then.” I gave them each a quick peck on the cheek and a hug.

“Tony?” said Ruth.

“What?” I asked as I turned toward the door.

“You are not going to take me with you to help with Darkness, are you?”

“No.”

“Be careful then?”

“Yup. See you tomorrow Ruth. Nite Poppy.”

“Nite, dad.”

“And, Spider?” said Ruth.

“Yeah?” said Spider.

“If you doesn’t come back in one piece...” she covered Poppy’s ears and whispered a few words, “...I’ll cut your *Toy Dolls*’ off.”

“Right,” said Spider. Then to me, “Nice lady.”



There was one more hotel left to try. No luck. It was full too. It was looking increasingly like we would in fact be sleeping in the park. I hadn't realised until he mentioned it, Spider had a small tent in that oversized backpack. Be prepared indeed.

First we had to get to the public library before it shut. Presumably it would be shut on the Sunday so I prayed that it was still open. It was. I didn't think that they would have been all that happy to let Beaky and Petal in, but no one said a word about them and for once, Beaky kept his tourett's syndrome under control. At one point he tried to vomit on a copy of the '*Socialist Worker*' - which might have been a political comment - but nothing came out.

I asked the rather scrawny (but helpful) male librarian if he could direct me to the map area. He did better than that. Not only did he take me right to the map I wanted, but he photocopied the relevant bits free of charge.

"But don't tell anyone," he said, "We are not allowed to photocopy maps."

There, as clear as day, was marked '*The Old War Shelter*'. It was right on the very edge of town. In fact it was not really in the town at all, but the country. A piece of cake.

"You any idea how I could get to there with there being a transport strike?" I asked.

"The old war shelter? Why on Earth would you want to go there? There is nothing out there but the marshes and the quarry."

"Who lives there?"

"I've no idea. I don't think anyone lives there. I can check the electoral register for you if you like?"

"That would be great," I said.

He disappeared off through a nearby door and returned almost immediately.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I forgot. Our microfiche reader is broken. The repairman is coming on Monday morning. He'll be here before we open to the public. Should be fixed by the time we open."

"Oh, Pity!"

"If you need to get to the old war shelter, you will have to use your car. Even if the buses were running, it ain't on any route."

"Haven't got my car with me."

“You can always get a taxi? Though you’ll need a mobile phone to call another one when you want to come back.”

The last thing that I wanted was a taxi driver involved. If we got up to any skulduggery, he was one more witness to worry about. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I wish that I’d never mentioned the old war shelter to the librarian.

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter. I just heard that there was a good salmon tributary up there and wanted to have a look.”

“I don’t know where you heard that, but there ain’t no river up there? You do dry or wet fly?”

“Look, I don’t meant to sound rude, but I’m in a bit of a hurry. I’ll have to go.”

“I quite understand, Mr... erm?”

“Williams. Robbie Williams.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m being nosy, Mr Williams, but have you been in the newspapers or on the telly recently? Your face is very familiar?”

“Nope. Never been in either *ever*. Must have a look-a-like?”

“Must have? You up for the Shakespeare festival?”

“No! Yes! Sorry, but I really have to go now.”



The ‘*Red Lion*’ public house was surprisingly comfortable about letting a skunk and a cockatiel in. “If they shite anywhere, you clean it up,” said the barman. Give him a black mask and a noose he would not have looked out of place on a pair of gallows.

Although the pub looked a bit rough on first sight, there was a good atmosphere. The locals were lively, but never did more than glance at us. As usual, Beaky and Petal got all the attention. I don’t think that there was anybody who didn’t feed Petal lots of crisps and peanuts. Beaky made a bit of a pest of himself by trying to help himself to folks beer. At first they thought that this was extremely funny - a few of them let him have a sip - but the novelty soon wore off. From then on, everyone guarded their drinks.

All too soon, it was closing time and we headed off for the park. Luckily, Spider actually remembered where it was. We had passed it in the taxi on the way in to

Stratford, but I had become disorientated by all the walking about. A bridge across the river, beside the playhouse, led to the park.

“In you get then.” I said.

“Eh?” said Spider.

“There’s the river. You can get your condoms out and wade through it now.”

“Sex and travel to you, matey.”

“Eh?”

“Go forth and multiply.”

The park was a disappointment. There was nowhere out of the way that we could crash out. The bright moonlight would have pointed us out like a spotlight to any passing policemen or muggers. It was also very exposed. Lie about here all night in a thin tent and we were liable to get hypothermia from that numbing wind. Beaky was struggling against it. He would alight on my or Spiders shoulder for a few seconds only to get blown off seconds later. Petal didn’t seem to mind. It was all a great skunk adventure. Maybe we could sell the film rights to Disney?

“There’s trees over at the far end,” said Spider.

We traipsed over to the far end of the small park. The dense trees were a broad strip about forty feet thick. They ended at a short wall. It was fairly obvious that there was no shelter here, but at least we would be hidden from casual passers-by. I suppose it was better than nothing? Because of his enormous backpack, Spider had great difficulty navigating his way through the undergrowth. Whilst he struggled, I had a look over the wall. Resplendent in the moonlight was line after line of tidy headstones. Over to the left were several rather large artistic structures. Tombs or crypts? What’s the difference? Very clean. With well manicured grass. It did not look at all spooky.

“A bone yard?” said Spider.

“Yup.”

“Maybe we can find a nice unlocked tomb to kip in?”

“Spider?” I tutted.

“Well we can’t pitch the tent here. No room. And if we rough it out here in this wind all night we’ll die of exposure.”

So over the wall we went. A cursory examination of the tombs revealed them all to be locked. At the far side of the graveyard was a small hut. It too was locked, but one of the side panels looked loose.

“If I pull this panel, see if you can squeeze through,” said Spider.

“Okay,” I said.

He pulled at the panel, but nothing happened.

“Harder,” I said.

He pulled harder. The whole side of the shed suddenly came off. Spider fell over. The side of the shed landing on top of him. The roof hinged down into the far wall where it smashed a window. That wall then fell inwards leaving the two end walls standing by them self. I helped Spider out from under the wall.

“I didn’t mean for you to pull as hard as that,” I said.

“Well how hard did you mean?” he complained.

“I don’t know. But not as hard as that. You hurt?”

“No.”

And with that, the remaining two walls collapsed. That was the end of that idea. It started to rain.

“Great! That’s all we need!” I said.

“Do you think anyone heard the racket?”

“Nope. They’re real heavy sleepers around here. Sleep like the dead in fact.”

By now, we were getting desperate. There was a sheet of translucent green plastic lying nearby on the grass. I went to walk across it and Spider grabbed my arm.

“Watch! There’s a hole under that.”

The edges were well weighed down. I moved a rock, lifted the thick plastic sheeting and peered in. Enough moonlight filtered through the plastic so that I could see that the hole was dry and deep. Either they had been expecting bad weather or the grounds men always covered such holes with plastic until they were used.

“Think it’s a grave,” I said, “An empty one.”

I pulled a bit more of the plastic sheet back and started to climb in.

“What do you think your doing?” asked Spider horrified.

“It’s dry and sheltered from the wind,” I said.

“But it’s a grave?”

“It’s just a hole in the ground. Pass me Petal down.”

Spider did as he was told. Beaky didn’t wait to be asked. He was straight in there before my feet touched down. Spider passed down his backpack and reluctantly followed it down into the grave.

“You got a lamp in there?” I said.

“Yeah. Two.” He fished one out of the backpack and turned it on. Finally out of the cutting wind, it actually felt slightly warm in the grave by comparison. Beaky perched on the backpack and tried to straighten his wind ruffled feathers. Spider pulled out a sleeping bag and with much difficulty started to spread it out. It was then that I realised that I had nothing to sleep on.

“You got another one of those in there?” I said.

“No. You’ll have to squeeze in with me.”

“Erm, it’s okay,” I said apprehensively. He *never* misses an opportunity. “I’ll manage without.”

“Suit yer self?” he shrugged.

He wriggled into the sleeping bag, had a quarter bottle of Vodka as a nightcap and settled down for the night. Without waiting to be asked, Petal squeezed in with him. I hope that she has another little skunky accident in the night.

“Traitor!” I told her.

I was a bit worried about Beaky. I had visions of finding a grey and orange Popsicle frozen to the side of the grave in the morning. I needn’t have worried. He bedded himself down inside the backpack. Not such a feather brain after all?

Within minutes, I was the only one left awake. Breathing clouds of steam in the moonlight. That sleeping bag looked cosy. So very, very cosy...



We were up and about early the next morning. Before 7:00 AM. Although it was still dark, we didn’t want to meet the graves rightful owner being delivered. The rain and the wind had stopped, though it was still pretty cold. Bone hurting cold. I hurt all over from trying to sleep in such cramped conditions. Surprisingly, the only part of me that didn’t hurt was my gammy leg. As I crawled out of the grave, Spider remarked that I

looked like something that had just crawled out of a grave. And that is what I felt like too. Imagine having to spend eternity in a hole in the ground? Well actually, I didn't need to imagine it. One way or another - that is where I would someday end up. Where we *all* end up.

By the dark graveside we had a nice cold breakfast of salami, roll mops and lashings of ginger beer. I thought that Spider would moan about it and produce his own gourmet breakfast from within his cavernous backpack, but no. He has just as bad eating habits as I have. Petal had a tin of tuna, a dog chew and some ginger beer. She looked at me as if to say, '*What, no Irn Bru?*' Beaky settled for a quick bit of millet and a drink out of a puddle.

"You know something?" said Spider.

"What?"

"A grave would be a good place to hide a dead body."

"Huh! That is what they are for dumbo," I tutted.

"No. I mean, dig a hole in the grave and bury a body in it. When they put the coffin in no one would be any the wiser. Two for the price of one."

"How do you dream this stuff up, Mr sicko?"

"D'know. Just talented I guess."

We tidied up best we could. Basically this meant dropping our rubbish in the empty grave. Spider said that he had to go and see a man about a dog and would be back in a minute or two. He disappeared off into the trees outside the graveyard taking a tube of glitter with him.

According to the map, the old war shelter was six or seven miles by car. As the crow flies it was only four miles. There was even a narrow cycle path for the first three miles. A cakewalk.

We set off in good spirits just as the sun was coming up. It looked as if it was going to be a nice day. Cold, but nice. That red sky in the morning tripe was just an old wife's tale that was only fit for old wife's. The footing was good as the cycle path was in excellent repair. I let Petal off of the leash. She was rather annoyed at the slow progress we made because of our bad legs. She kept on running ahead and then stopping to wait on us catching up. Beaky was quiet for once. He seemed happy enough just perching on Spiders backpack and watching the scenery. Not that there was

much. After about an hour of walking, we reached an unsignposted fork in the cycle path that was not on the map. After much arguing, we took the right hand fork and set off entirely in the wrong direction.

After another hour and a lot more arguing, we finally realized that we were going in the wrong direction. Not having the slightest clue as to where we were on the map, there was no choice but to double back to the fork in the cycle path. Half way back, it started to get rather dark. Minutes later, it began to snow big dry flakes. They showed no desire to melt.

The left hand fork quickly showed its self to look more promising. Another hour later and it twisted off sharply to the left to join the main road. It was at this point it was necessary to continue cross country. After the hardness of the cycle path, the softness of the grass was a welcome relief to my aching feet. My bad ankle was particularly painful. Oh, how I wished that I'd remembered my walking stick.

That librarian chappie was right. It was very marshy from this point onwards. the atmosphere became very spooky and tense. The snow fell thicker and thicker. Very dry and very cold. The animals became rather subdued. That smart Beaky sheltered underneath the hood of my coat. It was rather nice feeling him sitting there, though his sharp little claws scratched at my neck.

Spider and myself did very little in the way of talking. There was a silence that came from a tomb. Sharp and as cold as the day. The little talking that we did was quiet as if we were scared to say anything in case the sound attracted a monstrous something which was bound to roam the marshes. Not quite a hound of the Baskervilles, but maybe just as deadly.

I guess that the apprehension of our purpose had finally capillaried its way into our consciousness. There was an awful lot of things going unsaid. Even the animals seemed to be aware of a malevolence in the air. A tangible force that slowly raked a rusty blade over the nervous system. It was right to feel this way. However justified the rationale, the objective was still murder. *Murder?* When had I changed my mind back to that? Weren't we just looking for hard evidence? Is murder really the only option? Maybe we will find that evidence? Am I capable of murder? The ultimate sin? For reasonable people, the intentional ending of a life is not an easy contemplation. There *has* to be another option?

With the restricted visibility, It was not really surprising that we got lost. Walking cross country in a snowstorm without a proper map or compass is a pretty dumb thing to do. But as the old saying goes, its always darkest before the dawn. Just when I had sunk into deep justifiable pessimism and was hoping that I'd get sucked down into the march, the snow suddenly stopped and the sun came out. Within minutes, the snow had started to melt and the birds renewed their twittering.

Beaky did a lot of stretching and preening before deciding to confuse the local bird life by doing impressions of whatever whistling they sent our way. Soaked to the bone, on painful legs, we all reached the top of a small muddy hill. There, less than a hundred yards away, was a large picture window set in the living rock of a cliff which had rose out of nowhere. Beside it was a door and a smaller window. A large area in front of it had been concreted over and a proper road ran off by some dense trees presumably to join the main road. There was an old fashioned roofed (and very empty) carport which looked big enough for at least three cars. Over to the right of the door was a very out of place looking log pile.

Wet, sore, unhappy and having taken nearly nine hours to travel only four miles, we had arrived.

"Thank God for that!" I said.

"I thought that we were never getting here," said Spider.

"What do we do now?"



"You could ring his doorbell," said Spider, "When Darkness comes out to see who it is, I'll batter him over the head with something heavy."

"And what if he has got one of them peephole things? He knows what I look like."

"All right, I'll ring the bell then. He don't know me. You hit him over the head."

"What's wrong with just using your stun gun thingy?"

"Erm, you could do that..."

As plans went, this was pretty feeble, but it was the best we had. Spider took the mobile phone out of a pocket, flipped the top open and tested it. Two blue sparks

popped between the electrodes followed by a cartoon like whine and then nothing. He banged the thing against the heel of his hand several times, but to no avail.

“Damn! The dampness must have got to it.” he declared.

Leaving my bag, Spiders backpack and the animals in the car port we approached the home of Darkness. There was no sign of any peephole. I tried to lift a log from the log pile only to discover that they were all fixed together with hidden bolts or some such thing. Must have been there for decoration? Yes, the logs had been varnished. To the side of the log pile were a few loose logs. We picked up one each.

“What’s the plan then?” said Spider.

“You slap his face and I’ll grab the money. Better still, I’ll slap the money and you grab his face.”

“Ask a reasonable fuckin’ question?” he sighed.

“Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“No need to be. There’s probably no one in,” said Spider.

“What makes you say that?”

“No cars parked outside.”

“Oh!” I felt foolish that I hadn’t realised this blindingly obvious fact.

Expecting the button to explode, I pressed the doorbell and waited. A pleasant tinkling filtered through the door. Other than that, all was silent. I waited a few minutes and repeated the process. Then a third time. Nothing?

I went back to my bag and removed the set of lock picks that I’d made weeks ago. There was a pretty ordinary looking Yale under which was a mortice lock. The Yale would be a piece of cake. Just use the old credit card routine which is a lot harder than it looks, but I’d practiced extensively. Unfortunately, the Yale had to wait until the mortise lock had been dealt with. This was a bit more difficult. I could feel the pins sliding home, but could not managed to get more than two of the three pins to lock at the one time. After twenty minutes of listening to Spider complaining, the three pins slipped home. It was at that point that I remembered that I needed to used a screwdriver to turn the mechanism. The screwdriver was still in the bag. Either I could ask Spider to run and fetch a screwdriver or I could risk it and try and turn the clock with the picks. I chose the latter. The barrel of the lock turned easily at first. Then it snagged and the

pins all popped out again. By this time, I had cramp in both hands, a sore wrist and back. I was not a happy bunny.

“Bastard!” I said.

“Och, out of the way!” Spider declared angrily and started kicking at the door. “Open ya dirty arrogant bastard!” Over and over he effed and bloodied as he tried to boot in the door. Eventually he stopped exhausted.

“Did you enjoy that?” I asked.

“Bastard,” he told the door again and gave it a last kick.

“Don’t you think that Darkness might suspect something if he comes home and finds the door kicked it?”

“Och, I’m fed up Tony. I haven’t had a drink all day. I *need* action.”

“There must be another way in?”

“Maybe we should hide in the trees until he comes back and highjack him when he’s unlocking the door?”

“If this used to be a war shelter. There must be at least one emergency exit.”

“I said we could get him whilst he’s unlocking the door.”

“But where would it be?”

“You ignoring me?”

“No,” I said ignoring him. Now that I thought about it, there had to be at least two other exits. One a distance away. Maybe in the nearby quarry? The other would be near the main entrance? But where? Where? Where?

“You are ignoring me, aren’t you?”

“No,” I repeated.

Everything here was dull, but functional? There was nowhere to hide anything? The front door and the car port were the same grey as the rock and the road. No help there? The only thing out of place was that decorative log pile? That *had* to be it? I tugged at a few logs. They were firmly in place. No give at all? They must be bolted to something hefty? I pushed at them with all my weight and felt something give ever so slightly.

“Found it!” I said.

“Found what?” said Spider.

“I think that there is a fire escape or something under these logs.”

Spider peered down the crack where the log pile and the wall met. So did I.

"I think you're right," he said.

"Yup, I said and fetched my bag. I took out the longest of the screwdrivers and started to probe down the crack. In the middle was some kinda spring loaded latch. I poked it with the screwdriver and leant on it heavily. With a snapping noise, something gave. The screwdriver went down behind the log pile and I fell on top of it. The whole pile swung out to the left. I slipped down the pile and onto the concrete where I managed to halt my progress by using my face.

"Pay dirt!" exclaimed Spider with a grin.

Dusting myself off and picking bits of grit from my face, I examined the find. Behind the fake log pile was a plain old storm cellar type of double door. By the look of it, it had not been used in a long time. It and the back of the log pile were covered in cobwebs. There was an extremely rusty lock which looked as if it would break off with one good hit. I gave it one good hit. It broke off.

Complaining rustily, the doors swung down. Dust puffed upwards. A flight of concrete stairs led down into darkness. Given that there were just as much cobwebs in there, it seemed unlikely that Darkness had ever explored this part of his house; at least not for a long time.

For a second or two, I had an intense experience of *Déjà vu* as the view reminded me of just about every *Famous Five* and *Hardy Boys* mystery I'd ever read (and not all whilst still a kid). I didn't for one second believe that such feeble security had existed back during the war. It must have been converted sometime in the interim.

"After you," I said gesturing.

"No, after you, Tony Boy."

"Thought that you *needed* the action?"

No, after me, said Petal, appearing out of nowhere and dashing down the stairs. Seconds later she was followed by a blur of feathers. Spider took some bits 'n' pieces out of his backpack and then hid it in the nearby trees. Pausing only to switch on the hand lamps, we went down the first half a dozen stairs, turned round and clicked the log pile firmly shut behind us. Despite the lamps, there was a lot of darkness.

A lot of Darkness...

Interlude In Darkness Five

Again, with each passing day, I become more convinced of fates guidance. A while ago, I realised an easy way in which to enhance those movements and sounds that I can't quite catch. The scratching. The crying. The whispers.

A long time ago, before Judy and I were one, I had a strange kinda illness. It bothered me over a few months and could have been serious if not caught in time.

Sounds that could not be there. Colours too bright. Wrong shades to that which was remembered. This was puzzling, but not frequent enough to cause concern.

Then pains. Legs. Arms. Stomach. Head. Mild at first, but slowly increasing. Hot. Sharp. Moving. I am warned. Still I do nothing.

Then, a discolouring of my feet. A Darkness under the reddened skin. More pain and a sickly sweet smell.

An emergency appointment for the doctor. In the passing hours, I saw things which could not be there. Tiny insects crawling over my skin. Nipping. Extruding. Injecting. In the doctors waiting room there was an eight inch grub (bright purple) casually perambulating its way unnoticed across the ceiling.

I had the presence of mind not to point it out to anyone. It was obvious I was hallucinating. Heart racing. Sweat pouring. Feeling the way those guys in the films looked. Those old jungle war films where they all ended up with malaria?

Within a minutes of seeing me, an ambulance was arranged. The intensive care unit. Days of pain and examinations. Unable to understand speech. Dalek's speaking in tongues. Fear. Paranoia. Another hidden agenda.

Bit by bit, coming back to reality. There was dry gangrene in both feet and slight liver damage. Neither caused permanent damage, though they could have brought death.

Ergot poisoning. A vasoconstrictor. Narrowing the blood vessels to the point where the flesh, starved of oxygen, starts to die.

An alkaloid mycotoxin. Suitably purified, it's derivative is well known as Timothy Leary's best friend, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide. LSD.

*How did I end up with this ailment? One word. Bread. I used to bake my own bread. The ergot fungus *Claviceps Purpurea* was present in a massive sack of whole grain flour purchased from a local farm. You may remember the case. It was in all the tabloids and made at least one TV news report. The government went in mob handed and shut the farm down. Burning all vegetation, stored grain and anything else which might be contaminated. It is rumoured that the farmer ended up very rich from the compensation. Now there is a thought? I wonder if I should have sued him?*

Anyway, that is all ancient history. A while ago, I was thinking about this incident for the millionth time. I realised that this might be one way in which I could enhance those fleeting movements and sounds. Not that I would intentionally use ergot - the contaminated grain was destroyed by the Ministry of Agriculture years ago - but there were other avenues available to me. Risky avenues can be attractive.

Psilocybe and Fly Agric mushrooms. The latter produced bad trips like the ergot. Later, I abandoned that line of research. They can cause coma or even death. The Psilocybe mushrooms were slightly safer, though more difficult to find. They produced a more desirable effect. The first trip on this was exceedingly nice. The second was so mild as to be disappointing. Increasingly larger doses produced more satisfactory results, though none of the trips were as intense as the first. Within a few months the local supply was diminished to the point where it was too much work to find any. And so the experiments stopped.

Then one day, when I was surfing through Amazon.com, I thought I'd do a search on LSD. I did not expect to turn up anything, but serendipitously hit pay dirt. There are quite a few books on the subject including one by Doctor Fester on how to make the stuff. In my surprise, I checked up on this matter. Publishing such books may be frowned upon, but they ain't illegal. In rapturous trepidation, I ordered a copy on import and waited an agony for it to be delivered.

Pure LSD turns out to be remarkably easy to make - though you have to be very careful. Absorbed through the skin. Indistinguishable from distilled water. Tastes of nothing. Smells of nothing. Even tiny amounts of vapour can do amazing things. I

wonder what would happen if I put a couple of pints of the stuff in the local water supply? Maybe, someday (one day), I'll give it a go.

The pure stuff was exactly what I had been looking for. The expression 'mind expanding' does not do the stuff justice. It can do magic. Under its influence, I can see sound and hear colours.

It is now so obvious and clear as to what (whom) is causing the peripheral disturbances. I can see Him now. He laughs. He smiles. He cries. He is me. I am Him. We are betrothed. Twined in eternity. Chained to destiny. Tied in fate. I am His tool. I am that which is doomed. I am the dead.

Satan, Mammon, Beelzebub. Call Him what you will. The Devil looks just like Kilroy Silk...

Chapter Ten

Hello Darkness My Old Friend

“Yes, David,” he concluded, “it would entail murder to carry out your plan.”

“Very well then, Perry.” I replied. “I shall become a murderer.”

Edgar Rice Burroughs

The short flight of stairs led to a short concrete corridor which in turn led to a four way junction. Water dripped irregularly from the ceiling into a large pool on the floor.

There were notices with arrows on them pointing off in various directions. They were unreadable due to rust. I shone the lamp down each branch in turn. The pathetic light did not show up any clues. Oh, what I'd give for a good old fashioned flashlight. The walls had at one time been that lovely shade of green that hospitals so love. Now they were just crumbling concrete with green patches of peeling paintwork.

“Where the hell did those two go?” I asked Spider.

“D’know?”

“Petal?” I called out, “Beaky?” Not a single sound apart for the loud rush of blood in my ears. Petal had a nose on her like a bloodhound and ears like a bat, but how the hell could Beaky managed to navigate in the dark?

The corridor to the front of us led to another flight of stairs. There was a bank of switches on the wall. Without thinking about it, I started to flick them down one by one.

“No power?” said Spider.

“Didn’t expect any,” I said continuing to flick the switches. Back at the four way junction, a light flickered into being.

“Ah!” said Spider.

“Ah, indeed my fine flatulent friend.”

We later discovered, that about every six or seventh light was still working. That there was any power at all *must* have been Darkness’s doing. Maybe he did go for walks down here in the bad weather?

Back at the junction, the right hand corridor disappeared off into the darkness. The left hand corridor had some lighting in it. Exploration discovered several locked doors and eventually a dead end. Back down the right hand corridor, some of the doors were unlocked. Some opened into other corridors. Some opened into large empty rooms. How the hell were we suppose to find the feathered and furred dynamic duo down here? After a few minutes, I realised that Spider was also missing or maybe it was me who was missing? The latter seemed more likely as I also realised that I hadn’t a clue as to which direction the stairs were. For what seemed like an eternity, I wandered down corridors and opened door after door. When I eventually found a corridor that was surprisingly well lit, I decided to have a breather. I was also bursting for a pee. I’d just got the little chap out and was preparing for the act, when someone came up behind me and cupped a hand over my mouth.

“Shh!” said Spider. Beaky was on his shoulder and in the other hand he held Petal by the leash. “Com’on.” He uncovered my mouth and pulled me off in the direction of an open door.

“You scared the crap out of me!” I complained quietly, but aggressively as I tucked my funny muscle back into its prison.

“Shut up! Com’on!”

He hurried me into a dark empty room and closed the door behind us.

“He’s here,” he whispered.

“Where?”

“There is a sort of a workshop a few doors along. He’s in there. Seems to be looking for something.”

“Let’s get him then.”

“What with? We left the logs up top!”

“Shit!”

“Look! Great! There is a pile of old newspapers over there!”

“What’s the hell’s that got to do with the price of fish?” I said far too loud.

“Shh!”

“Sorry!”

“Ain’t ya ever heard of a Millwall Brick?”

“No?”

He demonstrated. First the newspaper is - preferably a tabloid sized one - is rolled up into a tube. Then with some difficulty the tube is folded in half. The resulting sharp edge at the fold was as solid as a lump of brick.

“See? Once time, I split a guys skull with one of these.”

“Jezus Christ, Spider! You bloody could an all!” I hefted the Millwall Brick against the heel of a hand. “It’s solid!”

“I know,” he grinned.

“Where did you learn that?”

“Many years ago, before I got hip, I used to be a football casual.”

Each armed with a Millwall Brick, we crept back out into the corridor.

“Wait,” whispered Spider, “Take your coat off,” he said taking his coat off.

“Why?”

“Easier to move about.”

I did as I was told. With severe butterflies in my stomach we approached the relevant door. Spider looked more nervous than I felt. The door was open a few inches. Through the gap drifted the sounds of someone rummaging about. Slowly and silently, I swung the door open. A dozen feet away was a large workbench cluttered with all kinds of exotic looking tools. Behind the workbench was a large set of blue and maroon oxyacetylene cylinders. Beside this stood Darkness. He had his back to us and was rummaging through an open cupboard. He was wearing a familiar looking thick blue jacket with green shoulder patches.

Carefully I stepped into the room and moved to the right to allow Spider to follow me in.

Where had I seen such a jacket before? Oh, yes it was that time...

“Tell me what you want, what you really really want...”

Darkness froze. So did I. For a moment there was no sound at all except for feathered laughter. Taking something out of the cupboard, he slowly turned to face us.

It was Inspector Raeburn. Pleased to see a familiar face, I subconsciously lowered my Millwall Brick. What a coincidence? We had both managed to track Darkness down at the same time.

“Am I please to see you?” I grinned. “However did you manage to get in here? We had all kinds of problems. Didn’t we Spider?”

“Aye,” said Spider sounding bewildered. He had never met the Inspector before.

“It wasn’t a problem,” he said calmly.

“Special training?” I asked.

“No, I just used my front door key.”

Suddenly confused, I finally noticed what the thing he had removed from the cupboard was. It was pointing straight at me. With a deadpan expression, he pulled back the safety catch on the biggest handgun that I had ever seen.



Darkness forced us at gunpoint to empty our pockets, remove our watches and took my phone off me. All the while he complained about how disappointed he was. Our arrival had mucked up his carefully prepared plans which would need to be re-evaluated and new procedures implemented. I was so sorry to have upset his plans that I forgot to thank him for fucking my life up.

He ordered us to walk in front of him and led us out of the room and down the corridor. After a short distance there was a left hand turn. A few more yards and there was a large hole in the wall. Running into the hole was a chain of bulbs hanging periodically from a thick yellow electrical cable tacked to the ceiling.

“I found this place nearly two years ago. They must have bricked it up when the shelter was built. Been dying to show someone else, but I didn’t dare. It is too useful to risk letting anyone know about. The last guy nearly escaped. In,” he gestured with the gun.

Beaky did not like the look of the opening and flew off. Petal as usual was eager to explore and led the way. On the other side of the hole were a passages that seemed to be carved out of the living rock. You could see the tool marks from the poor bastards

who slaved to build it. The string of lights split into several other strings which snaked off down different passageways.

“There’s a whole warren of catacombs down here. Think it’s Medieval.”

“No, it’s not Medieval,” said Spider dryly.

“You know about such things then?”

“I have knowledge of dead places.”

“Dead places? What makes you say that?”

“There are a lot of ghosts here.”

“Ghosts?”

“I can see them,”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. This *is* a dead place,” Darkness smirked, “Move.”

An ever downwardly sloping walk through several branching passages ended at an open door. The door its self was a trellis of rusty metal strips. The gaps were just wide enough to squeeze your hand through if you didn’t mind losing an layer of skin. The string of lights stopped half a dozen feet from the doorway. The weak light permeated just far enough through the doorway to show up the interior of the room. Its twelve foot wide and high walls almost made a prefect cube. I say *almost* for there was no floor. It wasn’t an room, but a shaft.

“Now this *is* a place of the dead,” he said and pushed Spider through the open doorway. Spider gave a yell and dropped Petals leash. Still pointing the gun at me, Darkness picked Petal up by the scruff of the neck and threw her into the floorless room. At least that is undoubtedly what he intended. Petal squirmed about and managed to dig her strong claws into his arm. With a grimace of pain, Darkness dropped her. She hit the floor running and instantly disappeared off down a side passageway.

“In,” he told me and gestured again with the gun.

“No chance,” I said.

“Don’t be such a big fearty. I know it don’t look like it, but there *is* a floor in there. It’s just a few feet down.”

“Spider, you okay?” I called out.

“No, not really,” came the pained reply from the darkness, “I hurt my balls.” I peered into the room and could just make out Spider floating in the darkness about four or five feet down.

“Hurry up,” complained Darkness and kicked my backside.

“I’m going!” I climbed through the doorway and felt about for the floor with a foot. There wasn’t anything down there but space? Darkness shut the door on my fingers and I was forced to let go. A short fall led to an unseen object hitting me in the back. For a second my fall was arrested. Then I felt my self slide down between thin bars. In desperation, I clutched at the bars. Technicians of my sort are not known for their tough hands. Rusty spears of metal maggoted into the flesh. Despite this, I was not about to let go.

For an indeterminable length of time, I dangled over what I sensed to be vast drop. With encouragement from fear, my straining bladder decided to relieve its self. As the warm fluid filled my trousers, I started to lose my grip. Trying to re-gain it just succeeded in driving the rusty splinters deeper into my soft tissue. My right handhold was no more. For a moment I swung back and forwards by a three fingered decaying grip. Drops of blood dripped stingingly into my left eye. So this was how it was all going to end? A long fall into nothingness?

Then a hand. Spider helped me up onto what turned out to be a grid of metal bars. The gaps between the bars were at least eighteen to twenty inches or so across. The bars themselves impossibly thin. It was a miracle that their rotting splintered flesh could support our combined weight at all.

“You okay?” Spider wheezed.

“Yup,” I said unsure.

“You did better than me. I landed with a bar between my legs.”

“Ouch!”

“Ouch, indeed.”

“Enjoy your stay lads,” called Darkness through the trellis of the door.

“Fuck you asshole!” I screamed like a maniac. My voice amplified and echoed by the surroundings.

Darkness never said a thing. Just locked the door and was heard walking away. After a few minutes, he was back and unlocking the door. He was holding a large water

gun. A Super Soaker One Thousand. Nothing but the best, eh? Without warning he took it in turns to soak us to the bone. All the while, I ranted on and on near hysteria about what I was going to do to him. Eventually, I lapsed into depressed silence. During this event, Darkness did not speak. Why had he soaked us? I could understand it if it had been really cold in here. One more thing to torment us with. But it wasn't. In fact, as temperatures go, it was quite comfortable. I thought that underground it was always cold. Must depend on the type of rock?

"Darkness?" said Spider quietly, water dripping from his nose.

"The name is Inspector Raeburn or Stevie."

"Stevie?"

"Yes?"

"They will come after you, you know?"

"Who?"

"The ghosts."

"Whatever you say," he said in a disinterested tone."

"Someday, you will have to pay the ghosts."

"Right," he sighed and was gone. After a long moments silence the light encroaching from the passageway was switched off. Velvet darkness enfolded the silence.

"Pay the ghosts?" I said, "Where do you get such shite?"

"They're all over the place. Look down into the shaft. It's full of them."

Full of apprehension, I looked downwards.

"It's pitch black. Can't see anything," I said.

"You can hear them though?"

"No."

"Oh, I forgot? It's just me. You don't have any of *'the gift'*"

"Is that why you didn't want to sleep in the grave?"

"Don't be daft! You don't get ghosts in graveyards!"

"Why not?"

"Cause people don't die in graveyards, stupid!"

"Oh, right," then changing the subject, "What *exactly* is this place?"

“D’know, but like I said it ain’t Medieval. These bars wouldn’t be in such good condition if they had been Medieval. A far older, but superior technology. This place isn’t hundreds of years old. It’s thousands of years old. Maybe even before the Pharaohs.”

“How can you tell?”

“I just can. There are vibes. Trust me. Bad vibes. Believe me, big bloody *bad* vibes.”

You know something? I didn’t doubt Spider for a second.

“You wanna know what I think?” said Spider.

“What, do you think?” I said.

“I think, we should have paid more attention to the tarots warning.”

“You wanna know what I think?” I said.

“What, do you think?” he said.

“I think you should shut the fuck up.” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “So do I.”



Whilst in hospital, I had had trouble with bed sores. They were nothing compared to those created whilst balancing on thin metal bars. Within hours there was a very real danger of dropping off the bars into the blackness below. I say hours, but there was really no way of telling the time. It was probably being telescoped out of all proportion. We were very cold, hungry, thirsty, tired and in a great deal of pain. Attempting to sleep was not a realistic option. The only thing that we could do was to talk in an attempt to stop from dozing off. The pain in my wounded hands was concerning me. I begged for light to examine them.

“I somehow don’t think that we will get out o’ this yin, Tony,” Spider sighed.

“Neither do I. If only he hadn’t taken my mobile off me?”

“Och, it probably wouldnay huv worked this deep underground anyway.”

“Probably not,” I gave a mental shrug, “Maybe we can hang on until Ruth gets the police? Think that you can balance here until then? And then wait God know how long for them to find us?”

“No,” he sighed, “Not really. About another five minutes tops.”

And then things started to get weird.

“Spider?”

“What?”

“What do your ghosts look like?”

“Just ghosts. Grey floating bits of mist. Just glowing enough to be seen in the darkness. Why?”

“Cause, I can see them, but they don’t look anything like that.”

“What day they look like?”

“Just like people. White and yellow and transparent. Floating like dolls in a pool of moving water.”

“White and yellow? You can see their faces?”

“Yes,”

“Are there any other colours? Reds? Blues?”

“No,”

“Concentrate on them. See the colours.”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

Too weary to argue, I did as I was told. Within moments, there were ghosts of all colours of the rainbow.

“You are not seeing ghosts,” said Spider.

“Yes, I am,” I said near panic.

“In the past I’ve done a lot of drugs. I was particularly fond of LSD. It made the ghosts clearer and funny colours. It used to make me laugh at them.”

“Is it making me see the ghosts?”

“You are not seeing them at all. You are just in a suggestible state because of what I said a while back.”

“About paying the ghosts?”

“Yes. That Bampot must have soaked us with LSD or something similar.”

“As if we didn’t have enough problems?” I sighed, “Why aren’t you seeing things then?”

"I am now. The LSD is working on us both. Try and think logically. No negative thoughts, Tony or you'll be down that shaft with the ghosts."

"Great!" I said.

"If you feel like you are losing it, tell me and I'll talk you down."

"And who will talk you down?"

"I don't need anyone. When you are an ex-druggy alky with a touch of *'The Gift'*, you get used weird shit."

"Right."

"I'll be okay, Tony Boy!"

"Right. And Spider?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't call me Tony Boy."



After hours without sleep, fatigue was becoming a serious problem. So was thirst. Food we could do without for weeks (theoretically). Without water we would be lucky to last four or five days. Lack of sanitary arrangements was not a problem. Without food and water there was no need to go to the toilet.

At some point Petal came back to visit. I couldn't see her and she didn't make a sound, but it was obvious she was there. It appeared that she had had another attack of skunkyness. That foul death like stench permeated down into our prison. As if we didn't have enough problems? Never mind, at least it was a change from the smell of my urined trousers.

I kept on feeling as if I was flying. Logic told me that I wasn't, but I could no longer feel my hands holding the bars and became disorientated. I slipped in and out of weird dreams. I dreamt that Spider and I had long conversations without opening our mouths. I could see him in the darkness. When he did speak using his mouth, I could see the brightly coloured wisps of his soul escaping.

There was shouting. A lot of shouting. Things touching me. And screaming. A lot of screaming. And all the while, Spider was talking me though it. Demanding that I not give up. So many tears. And when I could not cry anymore, I cried some more.



“How far to you reckon it is to the bottom,” I said.

“D’know,” said Spider.

“Could we hang from the bars and drop down?”

“Nope. They are at least thirty or forty feet away and there is no reason to assume that they are actually at the bottom of the shaft.”

“I think I’ll take the risk.”

“Are you mad?” he said, “There could be a drop of hundreds of feet onto jagged rocks!”

“Could be water at the bottom?”

“Fine if it is only thirty or forty feet, but after a fall of hundreds of feet, water is as hard as concrete. What would you do if you survived? Swim circles in the blackness until you die of exhaustion? There ain’t gonnie be a way out down there. Those ghosts didn’t get to be ghosts by dropping a few feet into water and then finding a way out.”

“At least I would have something to drink.”

“If it was drinkable it would be that cold it would burn your throat. There’s a thought? You would probably die of hypothermia.”

“Can’t you think more positively?”

“Yes, but I can also be realistic. The purpose of escape is survival, not an alternate death.”

“Your suddenly quite the philosopher,” I sarcasted.

“Not suddenly. I’ve always been.”

“Yeah, but it’s the first time I’ve seen you - heard you - sober enough to make much sense. Why the hell do you pore that poison into your self all the time?”

“You take a drink ya hypocrite.”

“Hypocrite? Hypocrite, huh! Sure I take a drink, but I don’t have it for breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, supper and all the in-between times!”

“Och, calm down, man. Stop shouting. I don’t drink as much as that surely?”

“Course you do. I know about the super lagers in the college toilets. You even brought bevy into the hospital with you!”

“Thought that you would have realised by now, hospitals are a bad place for me. People die in them all the time. They are full of ghosts. Some of them quite nasty. That’s why I didn’t visit you very often.”

“That is why you drink? The ghosts?”

“Yeah. Sometimes it is impossible tay sleep ‘cause o’ the noise they make. When I’m awake, I’m a permanent nervous wreck. Drinking helps me tay cope.”

“Maybe they ain’t ghosts?”

“What day y’ mean?”

“You said that you had done a lot of LSD? Maybe you are just having flashbacks.”

“I’ve bin seeing them since I was a wee baby. I remember watching them fay my cot.”

“I had no idea...”

“No reason y’ should. Never told anyone aboot it before except ma old blind uncle Spider.”

“You always been able to see ghosts?”

“A wee bit. At first just noo and then. Insubstantial and silent. Started getting bad when I hit puberty. I thought I was going out of ma heed.”

“I bet!”

“But, I never took to the drink until after uncle Spider disappeared and I didn’t have anyone to talk to about it.”

“You could have told your close pals? You’ve got loads of mates.”

“Loads of mates, yes. Close friends, no. I hay difficultly trusting folk. Make a close friend and that is just wan more person to let you down. Wan more backstabber.”

“You poor bastard!”

“Yes. That’s me a’ right, Tony Boy. A right poor *bastard*. Poor, poor bastard...”

“I didn’t mean...”

“I know what y’ meant. If you dinnay mind, I’d rather no talk fur a while. My throat hurts and my mouth is too dry.”



“How long do you reckon we have been down here?” I said.

“D’know, Tony, but I’d be willing to bet that Ruth will have been to the police by now. I really didn’t think I would last this long. Maybe we can hang on a bit longer?”

“Yeah, maybe?” I said

“You still feeling the LSD?”

“Yes, but not much. I’m feeling strange, like I’m drunk, but not seeing anything. Probably lack of sleep? You, Spider?”

“Huh, I wish! The demons are gathering strength!”

Just then, the lights in the passageway outside came back on. After the extended period in the dark, so meagre a light was blinding. Not as blinding as the spark of hope that it ignited.

With my eyes now sensitive to the weak light, for the first time it was possible to see the inside of our prison. The walls were not quite like those of the passageway outside. They were decorated with crumbling human skulls. If there was a ghost to go with every skull, that was one *big* pile of ghosts.

The previously unseen shaft below the grid dropped away into a vertigo producing nothingness. It was lucky that we hadn’t had the urge to explore the prison in the dark. Several of the bars were either missing or hung down the shaft.

A careful examination of my hands was disturbing. The left one had several rusty splinters in it. The right one was covered in dried blood and had a couple of nasty wounds in the fingers. It was a miracle that I hadn’t bleed to death. I still had blood poisoning to worry about - if I lived long enough.

A few minutes later came the sound of the door rattling and the lock unlocking. With a lust filled cry for oil, the door swung open.

“Hi guys! Not dead yet I see. The last occupant didn’t last as long. I’ve brought you some company.”

Of the handgun and the Super Soaker there were no sign. Rushing him was out of the question. In my weakened state just redistributing my weight was a major task. It would be kinda difficult to get out of here under good circumstances. There were no bars near the door on which to stand and climb out. I know it was only about four or five feet, but it might as well have been a mile. To rush Darkness would have taken several minutes.

Darkness disappeared from view for a few seconds and returned holding a zombie lady. Her hair hung in rat tails over her face and she could not stand up properly by herself. One hand momentarily searched for something to weakly hang on to and was then still. All she wore was an old blue tee-shirt, a faded pair of jeans and a pair of Reeboks. No jewellery. No watch.

“You better grab her quickly, before she goes down the shaft.”

As Darkness started to lower her over the edge, she mumbled something incoherently, but otherwise made no attempt to help herself.

With much difficulty, myself and Spider moved closer. I grabbed a swinging leg. Spider grabbed the other.

“Hurry guys!” Darkness laughed, “I don’t think I can hold on much longer. Oops!”

He dropped her. Spider lunged and caught her tee-shirt. We both pulled. The tee-shirt ripped revealing a nice lacy red bra. Spider went backwards and head first through one of the gaps between the bars. I thought that he was heading for the bottom of the shaft the quick way, but no. He grabbed the bars and pulled himself up far more easily than I had. I was in more trouble than he. The woman’s legs hung down into the shaft. My painful one handed grip was faltering as my centre of gravity was eroded. It would just be a matter of seconds before we both went down the shaft...

And then Spider was there easing the strain. Allowing me to re-new my grip and shift my weight to a slightly better position. We pulled her into a safe position. With a painful grating a couple of the bars shifted downwards. They slid inches out of the wall. How much more metal was still in there, I could not guess. It looked as if the weight of three people was just too much for the ancient metal to tolerate for any length of time.

“Tony?” the woman croaked.

I recognised both her voice and her face.

“Ruth?” I said bewildered, but she was silent.

“What have you done to her?” asked Spider.

“Me? Nothing,” said Darkness, “Maybe it was the combination of *alcohol*, *rohypnol*, *benzodiazepine*, *lorazepam* and *dothiepin hydrochloride* and a couple of others that I’ve forgotten. They were not all really necessary, the *rohypnol* and booze should have been enough on their own, but what the hell, I like to experiment.”

“You!” I shouted, then lapsed into a pregnant silence. There really was *nothing* worth saying. Darkness waited with a look of intense interest. For a moment he became one of Spiders demons. I stabbed my finger forward a few inches to emphasis my point. So doing, all the aggression drained from me like so much ice water through my perforated soul. Darkness was human again.

“You,” I repeated quietly.

“Yes?” he said.

“I’m going to kill you.”

“Course you are,” he sighed, “For a second there, I thought you were going to say something vaguely interesting. You might be comforted to know that I have decided not to go after your daughter. I don’t have any grudge against her.”

“Thanks,” I said as he started to close the door.

“As we will not meet again, I guess it’s goodbye,” he said through the trellis of the closed door.

“Hey, wait?” said Spider.

“What?” said Darkness.

“Can you leave the light on and the door open? Please? Otherwise I can’t sleep.”

Darkness locked the door and was off down the passage to rejoin his own life.

“I suppose a Babysham is out of the question?” shouted Spider. Darkness left the lights on this time.

I was hate. Pure hate. Nothing mattered any more. Just hate. Hate. Hate! Hate? Whimpering ever so slightly, I rocked back and forth whilst tightly cuddling Ruth. I could no longer think straight and started to cry. I love you Ruth. I love you *so* much. So, so much...

“Pay the ghost,” I said, “He will have to pay me first.” Fine sentiments, but the words lacked fire. My realisation specific. We were finished. Not much time left for this world. The End. Full stop.

Emphasis was added by grating metal. Other bars began to loosen in their wall sockets. I hope that the next world will be better. Will we all meet up again? Will Beaky and Petal be there? Or have they other adventures still to come?

Somewhere along the way, we had all reached a *Jump On Zero* moment and jumped the wrong way. It's kinda ironic that Spider and I met in a prison and in a prison we will part company. The only good point amidst this decaying situation. Poppy was not down here with us. I wonder how her life will turn out?

Chapter Eleven

Sweet Child Of Mine

*“...That sweet childlike smile crept back
into her face, pathetic in the extreme,
for it seemed drowned in tears...”*

Baroness Orczy

On the Sunday of our cross country adventure, Poppy was bored out of her mind. Angry too. Probably pre-menstrual. Altogether a volatile combination. Particularly when applied to an extremely immature teenager. She avoided Ruth as much as possible.

In the morning, Ruth knocked a bottle of ink over her jumper and trousers. It had been balancing on a pile of boxes in the tiny room that Mrs Crabbe had put them up in. The lid was not on and the gummy old ink had been still viscous enough to soak right through to her blouse.

The shops in Stratford-Upon-Avon were mostly closed, but the market was on. Ruth managed to buy new underwear and some attire from a second hand clothes stall. Poppy refused to go with her, so Ruth wandered about the small market for a while. And Poppy reluctantly promised to stay in the hotel.

The live-in hotel receptionist Mrs Crabbe was a right royal pain in the backside. At least ways as far as Poppy was concerned. Her mother hen attitude was just the sort of thing to rub Poppy up the wrong way. After lunch, in desperation, Poppy went for a walk in the snowstorm. She didn't go far. Like many a town there was not really anything to do on a Sunday.

Between snow flurries, she asked passers-by to take photos of her with the disposable camera she had bought back in Burlington. A couple of photos by Shakespeare's cottage and another couple by a miniature bell tower looking thing which had a tiny wooden door in its base. There was a partiality obscured metal plaque

attached to it, but she could not be bothered taking her hands out of her nice warm coat pockets in order to wipe off the snow.

After a while, she found herself on the bridge near the Shakespeare playhouse. Standing there watching the snow disappear into the water had a magical quality to it. The silence and lack of wind enhancing the dream like atmosphere to the point where it would surely shatter. Just the sort of place for a really good brood. Brood. *Brood...*

It wasn't fair! She was never allowed to do *anything!* Parents? Huh! They didn't have a *clue*. After all, she was the one who had caught Darkness. It was *not* fair that she should be left out at the big finish. On the other hand, she had managed to get this far on her own. What was to stop her continuing? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing apart from it being a Sunday. Even to a twelve year old, it was obvious that the public library would be the place to start. The old war shelter was bound to be marked on the local maps. Now there is a thought? Local shops would have local maps too.

A quick search found two souvenir shops that were brave enough to be open on a Sunday afternoon. Neither had maps, though the second one had a stylised map on a tee-towel. The war shelter was not on it. As a present for her mother, Poppy bought a wooden carving depicting Anne Hathaway's cottage. A present of recompense for lying about where she would be spending the weekend.

Depressed, she wandered reluctantly back to the hotel and Mrs Crabbe. '*Hopefully*', she thought, '*Dad will not turn up tomorrow and I will have an excuse to go looking for him?*' Even as she thought this, she was ashamed. What a nasty thing to wish?



Monday morning eventually arrived. All the snow had melted, but the weather report predicted more. By the look of the grey sky most folks agreed with the weathermen for a change.

Poppy had no chance of going looking for me. Ruth refused to listen to her insane plans and set off by herself for the police station.

Breakfast and the interterm spent waiting for the library to open was the pure essence of tedium. Poppy had assumed the library to open at 9:00 AM. According to the verbally diarrhoeaed Mrs Crabbe the said building did not open until 10:30 AM.

As some of the guests had moved out the night before, there was now room at a table for Poppy. Unfortunately it was also Mrs Crabbe's table. The well meaning receptionist was preoccupied with her feet which she iterated about at great length to the near suicidally jaded Poppy.

In its snail like way, time passed and the library opened. By the time Poppy set out, Ruth had still not yet returned. To Poppy, the building was warm in comparison to the return of that icy wind.

"Do you know where the old war shelter is?"

"Yes. It's out by the quarry. What's happening out there? You're the second person to ask in as many days," said the scrawny librarian.

"Was it a guy with a grey cockatiel?"

"Yes."

"Did he have a skunk and a weird looking hippy guy with him?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Never saw him before in my life. I'm only guessing. Where's the quarry?"

"It's out near the... Do you know the area?"

"No."

"It will be easier to show you on the map, Miss, erm?"

"Halliwell. Just call me Geri."

"Oh, any relation?"

"Relation to whom?"

"Geri Halliwell."

"No. Never heard of him."

With an ease that came from experience, the librarian located the appropriate map. The old war shelter was clearly marked.

"Is this a recent map?" she asked.

"Yes. The date is marked on the legend. See?"

"Right. 1995. It's not all that recent is it?"

“Oh dear! That is the old one. Must been a mix up. Hold on and I’ll get the other one.”

It was just as well that the librarian fetched the newer map. Whilst the town had changed very little the surrounding countryside had its few cycle paths expanded into a network. There was a cycle path shown which came within a hundred yards of the old war shelter. She would just have to remember to take the right hand path when it forked. The left hand fork never got nearer than the marsh before it rejoined the main road. The right path was longer, but went around the marsh.

“Who lives there?”

“I don’t know, but I can soon find out,” he disappeared off through a door.

Whilst Poppy was waiting, she noticed that on a nearby table was something that looked suspiciously like bird dung. It had been sprinkled with glitter.

“Stephen Raeburn,” said the librarian on return.

“Raeburn? You sure?”

“Yes. The name rings a bell. I think that he is one of the local boys in blue. What do you want with him?”

“Nothing. I’m doing a school project about the war.”

“Is it your Christmas homework? Thought the schools didn’t stop for a few days?”

“Shut a few days early ‘cause the headmaster suddenly died.”

“Oh, dear! Was he ill?”

“No. Run over by a steamroller. Flat as a pancake. Had to bury him in an enormous envelope. Tragic.”

“I see,” he said suspiciously, “What school do you go to?”

“Sorry, I’d like to stay and chat, but I’m bursting for a pee. Cheerio.”

She took a photograph of the bemused librarian and left.



Poppy had never met Inspector Raeburn, but she had heard me mention him on many an occasion. Even at the tender age of twelve, Poppy realised that her mother was in trouble. It did not take much intelligence to fit a few things together. Something

smelled of trouble. Positively *reeked*. ‘*How long should I wait before going to look for them and what should I do when I get there?*’

She decided to wait until dinnertime. If I hadn’t appeared with my entourage in tow by then she would do something. What? Just something. Anything. Do like her dear old dad and make it up as she went along.

Sometime in the afternoon, Mrs Crabbe’s inane ramblings provoked premature action. She just *had* to get out of there. It was probably not a good idea to wait anyway. It would be dark by dinnertime. Walking in the dark, in the countryside, was *not* a good idea particularly with the forecast of more snow.

At first she considered going to the Stratford police station and asking for Inspector Raeburn. After all, if she was seen at the police station, he would not be able to do anything nasty. Too many expert witnesses. Although darkness had seen photographs of her, it was doubtful if he would recognise her with green cropped hair and dark glasses. This half baked idea was quickly discarded with the realisation that she had absolutely no idea what to do if he turned out to be there.

With her small barrel bag full of (hopefully) useful bits and pieces, she set out for Darkness’s domain.



In a bad place - not all that far away - another rusty metal bar slipped further out of its anchor hole.

Ruth decided to wake up. At first it was fluttering eyelids and then they were wide open. She was capable of speech, but couldn’t under anything I said. Luckily for us, she was quite weak and content to remain where she was. After many attempts to question her, I came to realise that her memory was not working. She remembered my name and she kept asking where Poppy was, but that was about all. How the hell had Darkness managed to get her into this state?

Shifting my weight caused that bar to finally wrench its self free and bounce reverberatingly from wall to wall as it journeyed into the shaft. For a second I lost my balance and came close to joining the ghosts.

“This thing is no gonnie hold much longer,” said Spider.

"I know," I said.

"I've an idea."

With much difficulty Spider made his way over to the doorway. The trellis that was the door was actually outside the room. This meant that there was a six inch ledge on the inside. Spider climbed up and, holding onto the trellis, balanced there whilst he removed his belt.

"Oh, what are you doing now?"

"Removing some of the weight from those bars, might buy us some time," he said passing the end of his belt through the trellis.

"What good will that do?"

"While there is life, there is hope, Tony Boy," he said as he strapped himself onto the door.

"Huh!" I said.

"You, my laddie, are getting to be a real pain in the ass pessimist."

"Do you blame me?"

Rustily rejoicing, another bar decided that it was time to start getting out and about a bit more.



Poppy made considerably better time than our expedition. By the time she arrived, she still did not know what she was going to do. Whatever it was, she better do it quick. Judging by the large blue Range Rover parked in the car port, Darkness was at home. With her heart in her mouth she rang the doorbell and silently prayed for inspiration. The door was opened surprisingly quickly. Darkness stood there resplendent in his disguise of normality.

"Hi, I'm Jane Smith," said Poppy.

Darkness grunted acknowledgement.

"I'm lost. Can you help?"

"Where are you trying to get to?"

"Stratford. Staying there on holiday."

"On holiday? In December?"

“Aye. Came down for the Shakespeare festival and got stuck with the transport strike.”

“I see. What you doing way out here? Stratford is miles away.”

“I was bored and went for a ramble.”

“You better come in. You look frozen to the bone. I’ll phone you a taxi. You really shouldn’t be wandering about the countryside at you age. Does your mother know where you are?”

“Hey, I’m not a wean you know!”

“Course your not. Come on in. I was just about to cook my tea. You hungry?”

“Aye. Dead hungry,” she replied entering. After so long in the wilds, the heat of the house was luxurious.

“Aye indeed. You’re a long way from home. Where about in Scotland do you come from?”

“Glasgow.”

“No mean city, eh?”

“Aye.”

“How does a fry up sound?”

“Great!”

She dumped her coat and bag on a gestured coat stand and followed him into the large kitchen. The room was spotless and dominated by an enormous cooker which was built into a central workspace which extended into an oak table. Just about every modern convenience that could be thought of was positioned thoughtfully about the room. On the hob was a large frying pan.

“How does tomato’s, beans, Lorne sausage, black pudding, bacon and a fried slice sound?”

Poppy picked up the frying pan and battered Darkness over the head with it.

It is funny when Vic and Bob get bashed in the face with a rubber frying pan. When *you* get hit over the head with a large heavy copper bottomed frying pan, *you* will find that it *ain’t* so funny after all. Darkness didn’t do a nice theatrical fall to the floor. He went down like a sack of potatoes and gave his head a second crack on the floor.

“That’s for making me walk all the way out here! Where is my mum and dad you scumbag?”

Silence.

A quick examination revealed the good Inspector to be out cold. Tutting quietly, Poppy left the room only to return with her bag. Removing three long nylon (extremely unbreakable) tie-wraps, she first strapped his wrists behind his back. Next his feet were strapped together. Finally, his feet were pulled up to meet his wrist which were then both bound together by the third tie-wrap. Darkness had been efficiently hogtied by a teenybopper a fraction of his size.

Feeling rather smug, my psychopathic daughter put the kettle on and had a look in the refrigerator for something that didn't need cooking.



With a cry of delight, an iron bar managed to slip a little further from its anchor hole...



Poppy was finishing off her large chicken salad sandwich. She was on her second cup of tea when Darkness came round with a groan.

"Where is my dad you sleazebag?"

"Who are you?" Darkness groaned, "Oh, you're her ain't you? The daughter? I didn't recognise you with the green hair."

"You ain't whistlin' Dixie mister."

"And I'm the one who did not think that a twelve year old was capable of coding their own Trojan program. It *was* you wasn't it?"

"Yes. Where *is* my dad?"

"How should I know?"

"You want another belt from this?" so saying she lifted the frying pan and gestured threateningly.

"Hit me all you want missy. I *still* don't know where your father is."

As if waiting for his cue, Beaky flew into the kitchen. With a squawk of pleasure he alighted on Poppy's shoulder and started to nuzzle her. She took a moment or two to

welcome and pamper Beaky and then hit Darkness again. She did not put so much effort into it this time, but still managed to make Darkness yell.

“Jesus missy! You’re a bloody loony!”

“No, I’m not a loony mister. Just a heed banger. Where *is* my dad?”

“He’s down in the shelter.”

“Whereabouts?”

“I don’t know. I lost him and his pal in the darkness. I only put lights in the main part.”

“Oh come off it! If they were wandering about down there, you wouldn’t be making your dinner and you certainly would not have answered the doorbell. Tell me where he is or I’ll take your head off with this,” she gestured with the frying pan again.

“Oh, do bugger off little girl,” he sneered.

“I’m not a little girl! I got breasts and everything. Look?”

“So I see. Pretty small aren’t they? When do you get your first training bra?”

“I’m not...”

Whack!

“A little...”

Clang!

“Girl!”

Batter!

This time, Darkness was out for the count. His head was bleeding. Disappointed, Poppy threw the frying pan into the sink - stopping only to collect her coat and bag - and was off exploring with Beaky.

The Inspectors house was rather nice. Thick carpeting. Colour coordinated with themed rooms. Very plush and expensive looking with electronic gadgets all over the place. Every electronic gadget you could think of except one. No computer system.

The doorway to the main part of the shelter was easily found. Was not hidden or anything. An unlocked door leading through a badly lit passageway into a large cluttered storage room. Each wall had an open staircase leading out of it. The opening in front of Poppy was dark and relatively inaccessible due to a pile of tea chests. *Old* tea chests. The stairways to the left and the right were well lit. The concrete stairs went

down a long way. Poppy choose the right hand flight and began her decent into the unknown. Waiting at the foot of these stairs was another familiar face.

“Petal!”

Ecstatic, with her leash trailing behind her, Petal ran at Poppy up the remaining stairs and welcomed her in much the way that a dog would have. The excitement over with, Petal tried to get into Poppy’s pockets.

“They’re in here.” Poppy removed a pack of dog chocolate drops from an inside pocket. Poppy consumed them like she hadn’t ate for weeks instead of just over a day.

“Your starving! Poor thing!” She tipped the rest of the bag out onto the floor where Petal was joined by a hungry Beaky.

“You too, feather brain?”

“Hungry like the wolf,” said Beaky.

Petal finished of the chocolate drops, but was polite enough to leave several for Beaky. Nearby was an open door. Poppy investigated. It was some kind of a workshop. The room was dominated by a large workbench and a set of oxyacetylene cylinders. Tools were strewn all over the place and also spilled from open cupboards onto the floor. It looked for all the world as if someone had been looking for something and couldn’t be bothered putting everything back. A cursory examination provided no clues. Poppy had an idea. Back in the corridor, Poppy took hold of Petal’s leash.

“Where’s daddy?” she asked Petal. Petal considered the matter carefully.

“Where’s daddy Petal? Go and get dad. Come on girl. Daddies got dinner for you.”

Dinner? This was the magic word. Like in all the traditional teenage adventure stories, Petal led Poppy straight to the ancient prison. Several times she paused seemingly unsure of the next turn, but the magic word ‘*dinner*’ soon put her back on track.



In the past hour or so we lost another two of our support bars down into the shaft. To further lighten the load on the remainder, we used my belt to strap Ruth to the door. Her own belt was just for show. It was a sissy girlie thing that wouldn’t have supported

a week old baby. She was still spaced out, though she seemed to have regained a bit of strength. If you told her to do anything she would do it without question.

I would have been happier myself if I had been also strapped to the door, but there was not enough room for more than two.

“Dad?” said a welcomed voice through the trellis of the door.

“Poppy?” I exclaimed and tried to stand up.

“Yeah, dad!”

“Poppy?” Ruth said drunkenly, “You should be in your bed?”

“Mum? How did you get here?”

“Go to your room,” said Ruth.

“What is the matter with you, mum?”

“She’ll be okay,” said Spider, “Just a bit confused.”

One of the bars on which I was balanced slipped downwards several inches. I moved to a new one and carefully moved to a standing position. Leaning against the wall near the door, I could see through the gaps in the trellis.

“Glad to see you babe,” I touched fingers with her.

“Can you let us out?” asked Spider.

“Nope,” said Poppy, “There is a really big padlock this side.”

“Can you pick it?” I asked.

“I know how to, but I’ve never tried it before. There’s nothing to use as a lock pick.”

“Our stuff is back in the shelter in a kinda workshop. There is a set of lock picks in my bag.”

“Did the workshop have big cylinders of gas in it?”

“That’s the place,” said Spider.

“I been there,” said Poppy, “There ain’t any of your stuff there. I would have noticed.”

“Go back there and look for a hacksaw,” said Spider.

“Okay.”

“And Poppy?” I said.

“Yeah, dad?”

“Be careful you don’t get lost. It’s a maze down here.”

“Huh! Teacher says that I’ve a near photographic memory. I’m not likely to get lost.”

“Hurry,” said Spider.

The trip back to the workshop took a distressingly long time. For the first time in ages, there were no rusty comments from the ancient bars. Then Poppy was back.

“I couldn’t find anything,” she said out of breath.

“A workshop without a hacksaw?” said Spider.

“There must have been one?” I said.

“No.”

“How about a file? Did you look for a file?”

“Yes. I looked. There wasn’t anything!” she wailed near tears.

“It’s okay pumpkin. Calm down,” I said, “Is that why you were so long?”

“No,” she said, “I went back up to the house to look through Inspector Raeburn’s pockets for his keys, but his body was gone.” sniffed Poppy.

“Body?” I said.

“Body?” said Spider.

“Bobby?” said Ruth.

“He’s okay. Didn’t kill him. Just knocked him out. Hit him with a frying pan.”

“Good girl!” I laughed.

“Do you remember seeing the big cylinders of gas? Were they still there.” said Spider.

“Yes,”

“That is an oxyacetylene torch welding rig. Do you think you could wheel it down here?”

“Yes. Maybe? I don’t really know? I couldn’t use it anyway.”

“Don’t matter. If you can get it here, you can feed the torch through the gaps and I can cut our way out.”

“I’ll go and get it,” she turned to go.

“And Poppy?” said Spider.

“Yeah?”

“Look for matches or a thing called a spark. It kinda looks like a pair of tongs with the ends sorta twisted together. When you click it, it makes a spark to light the torch with.”

“Okay.”



The spark was easy to find. It was inside a small toolbox that was bolted onto the welding rig near the handles. Initially it had been difficult to tip the welding rig back onto its two wheels, but once balanced, Poppy found it easy to manoeuvre. The problem did not come until reaching the hole in the wall that marked the passageway that led to the prison. The hole did not go all the way to the floor. There was a good six inches of brick left to get the rig over. After failing to tip the rig onto one wheel and lever it through the hole, Poppy decided to unstrap the cylinders from the rig and drag them through the hole one by one.

The blue cylinder was very heavy, but after a struggle she managed to get it through the hole. The other cylinder was more stubborn. It wouldn't budge an inch. This Poppy recognise as a bad sign. Not all that long ago, in school, she had been told that cylinders of acetylene gas got heavier when empty. Was the acetylene in the blue cylinder or the maroon one? If it was the blue cylinder - which you could hear something sloshing about in - then there was plenty of gas. If it was the other cylinder, it didn't look so good. That was something to worry about later. For the moment she had to work out how to get the other cylinder through the hole. The answer was staggeringly obvious. There were assorted hammers in that workshop. Some quite large.

The bricks were stubborn, but eventually came out. The major concern was that the good Inspector would come to investigate the noise. He never appeared. Was probably off somewhere doing a spot of murdering. Poppy was able to complete her task uninterrupted. Dripping with sweat, she was eventually able to get the rig through the enlarged hole. It was then a matter of loading the blue cylinder back onto the rig, strapping it back into place and wheeling it down the long passageway to the trellis door.

The welding torch handle was too big to pass through the door trellis. Spider managed to squeeze his hand through and get hold of the torch, but there was no way - even with Poppy's guidance - that he could direct it where it was needed.

"You will have to do it, Poppy," said Spider.

"I can't!"

"You can!"

"But, I can't!"

"Okay. Fair enough. Just let us die then."

For a while, Poppy considered the situation in silence.

"What do I do?" she said.

"Look at the gauges on the top of the cylinders.," said Spider, "What is the pressure?"

"Both the needles are at zero."

"Have a look in that wee toolbox for a sort of wrench."

"There are two."

"Is there a square ended one?"

"Yes."

"That is the one you want. Use it on the square nut at the top of the reddish cylinder. Nice and easy. No, turn it the other way. That's it."

"It's not moving."

"Use the other wrench like a hammer and give it a few taps."

She gingerly tapped at the smaller wrench with the larger one.

"Harder," said Spider.

She hit it much harder.

"I heard a slight hiss that time and the needle moved."

"Good. Now, keep on turning it until the needle gets to about twelve."

"I've turned it as far as it will go, but the needle is only at eight."

"Must be nearly empty. It will have to do. Now do the same with the other cylinder. That is the oxygen. Turn it up to about twenty."

She did as she was told. This time the wrench moved easily.

"Done it."

“Take the spark in one hand and the torch in the other. Use your thumb to turn the acetylene on. That’s the reddish tap. Use the spark on the gas. Oh, hold on! See if there is dark goggles in the tool box.”

The bar on which I was standing gave a slight lurch and a long groan.

“There isn’t. I remember seeing them back in the workroom. I’ll go and get them.”

“No!” Spider cried out in alarm, “We’re running out of time. You have to do without.”

“I’ve got my shades,” she said.

“Good. Better than nothing.”

She took her sunglasses out of a pocket, put them on and flicked on the acetylene. For a while it looked like the spark was not going to spark. With a pop a yellow flame appeared, almost disappeared and then stabilised into a healthy flare.

“Good,” said Spider, “Now slowly turn the oxygen up until the flame goes blue. It will get a bit smaller and thinner, but that is okay. Just be careful that you don’t accidentally pull that trigger on the handle.”

“Why?”

“Never mind. Just do it and use the flame on the hasp.”

“Hasp?”

“The bit that the padlock goes through.”

Poppy turned up the heat and applied the violence of the flame to the hasp. For a long time she waited, but nothing happened.

“It’s not cutting through it.”

“See, Tony. I told you that this ain’t Medieval metal. Use the flame on the shank of the padlock, Poppy.”

“What’s that?”

“The U shaped part that goes through the hasp.”

“Okay.”

It was a miracle how Spider was managing to keep so patient. I was on the verge of panic. If it had been me giving the instructions, I would have been shouting by now. The bar I was standing on gave another lurch. I considered moving to anything one, but they were too far from the wall to be able to lean on it. *Come on Poppy!* I was getting so scared that my stomach was really hurting and my bowels were getting looser by the

minute. There was a very realistic danger that I was about to have a bad case of diarrhoea. Oh, how I wished that I had not ever set out on this foolish venture. Instead of this foul situation, I could be logged on to IRC right now talking rubbish to someone I'd never met before or was likely to meet.

"It's getting orangey, Spider, but it's not melting."

"Oh, damn!" declared Spider, "You're gonnie have to burn it."

"Erm, can you hurry up a wee bit?" I said as the bar shifted once more.

"Go back to the oxygen cylinder and turn the pressure up to about a hundred."

"Okay," she said. And then, "Done it."

"Heat the shank up again. When it's nice and orange, pull the trigger."

"The one that you told me not to pull?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Now, it will be noisy and big hot sparks with fizz all over the place, but try to hold the flame steady. Don't be scared."

"It's nice and orangey."

"Give it a few more seconds."

The bar I was standing on finally gave way. In desperation, I clutched at the door ledge. Spider managed to reach down and grab an arm which enabled me to grab the trellis with the other.

"Now, Poppy," Spider said, "Now!"

This side of the door was suddenly obscured by sparks and a *loud* crackling fizzing. Poppy yelped and the pyrotechnics stopped.

"I can't do this!" Poppy started to cry.

"You have to!" shouted Spider, "We've only got seconds left!"

"I can't!"

"Poppy! Do it!" I shouted, "Just fucking do it!"

The sparking started again almost immediately. This time it stayed on. The sparks fell on my hair and hands. They hurt. It must have been worse for Spider. He was closer to the source. The smell was pretty bad too. Ruth didn't seem to notice anything.

An eternity later, the burning stopped and the door creaked open. Spider moved forward with the door and helped me up into the passageway. As he was unstrapping himself and then Ruth from the door, Poppy was hugging me and sobbing.

"It's okay pumpkin," I said, "Where is the feather and fur show?"

"They disappeared the minute that they heard the racket."

Spider took a mad turn and started to hit me repeatedly on the head.

"Hey!" I complained as I tried to fend him off. I managed to get one good slap at his face which made him stop.

"You daft bastard!" he told me, "Your hair was on fire."

Tentatively, I touched it. It felt hot and gluey.

"Sorry, Spider!"

"S okay," he responded and took the still burning torch from Poppy. With a practiced ease, he flicked both gas supplies off at the same time.

"You got any food with you, Poppy?" asked Spider.

"No," she answered, "But I've a big bouncy bottle of coke in my bag. Do you need a drink?"

"Do I?" declared Spider. Throwing the welding torch down, he dived on her bag and tried to rip the zip open. The zipper moved about six inches then jammed. Cursing, he tried to force it open. Failing, he tried to use his teeth. Still failing, he put a foot in the bag and pulled hard.

"Hey, you'll rip it!" said Poppy.

Still it would not open. He managed to pull the pouring end halfway out of the bag before it got really stuck. Not to be outdone, he fumbled at the bottle top.

"Let me?" I said and reached for the bottle.

"No! I can do it!" he turned away and used his teeth on the bottle top. What had happened to mister cool?

"Ouch!" he squealed and dropped the polythene bottle. He pressed a finger inside his mouth. "Ma filling!"

Poppy lifted the bag, unzipped it. Removed the bottle, opened it (it fizzed and squirted all over the place) and handed it to Spider. The two litre bottle of coke was nearly full. Still with a finger in his mouth, Spider started to chug it making hungry noises of delight.

“Slow down!” I said, “You’ll be sick after going for so long without water. Leave some for us!”

“Sorry!” he said and passed the bottle to me. The smell from the open bottle seemed to trigger off some kinda madness. With much difficulty, I managed to resist the compulsion to attempt to drink all the black gold. I made do with about half a pint. Lovely!

“You thirsty Ruth?”

She did not answer. Just took the bottle from me and drank a few sips.

“This tea’s cold,” she said.

“What happened to mum’s shirt?”

“Just got torn. That’s all.”

“Oh, I thought she had been fighting again. I’ve got that giant tee-shirt in my bag. One of the ones that I use as a nightdress.”

Still in a zombie like state, Ruth allowed me to slip the nightshirt over her head. You ever tried to put someone’s arms through shirt sleeves when they don’t want you to? It’s ten times more difficult doing it to an adult than a toddler. I lost my temper and had to take a step back to cool off. Ruth then decided to put the shirt on by herself. Must have been feeling the cold? I could have done with my coat as well.

There came a remote omni-directional rumbling which sounded all the world like distant thunder. This far underground, there was no chance of hearing thunder so what was it? The lights flickered and went out. Flickered and came back on. Flickered and stayed off.

“What now?” I groaned.

“Don’t anyone move,” said Spider.

After a confused silence came the sound of Spider using the spark to re-light the oxyacetylene torch. With Spider leading the way by a yellow flame and me pulling the oxyacetylene rig we slowly made our long way back to the old war shelter. About half way there, the air began to fill with dust. About the same time, the feather and fur show made another appearance. Beaky landing on Poppy’s shoulder screaming obscenities. Petal jumped into her arms and shivering with fright. They obviously knew something that we didn’t.

Apprehensively, we pushed on. By the time we reached the hole through to the shelter the dust was that thick that it stung the eyes and made us all cough.

When I say, '*reached the hole*' I was technically incorrect. What I should have said was, '*reached the place where the hole had been*'. It would appear that all Poppy's hammering had weakened the, already crumbling, concrete to the point where it could no longer support its own weight. I guess that when the wall collapsed the ceiling followed shortly after. There was no longer a way back into the old war shelter. We were effectively sealed inside our tomb. With an unrealistic certainty I was sure, that somewhere, Darkness was laughing...

Interlude In Darkness Six

Numbers. A number. Thirteen. Lucky for some, but meaningless until tied to something.

Another number. Thirteen. Not the same thirteen. Another one. In milliseconds, a spark. In eons, an eternity. Thirteen weeks of pestering the streets. Begging conflict. Beseeching a client. Nagging alleyways. Prostituting the soul.

It is not until you intentionally try to get mugged that you realise just how unlikely it is. The streets are safer than you think.

Thirteen weeks of harassing fate to get to number two. Now I'm at number thirteen. A work in progress. Such an enjoyable one is the 'Blair Project'. Rupert did not realise what he started. Thirteen endings. Thirteen renewals. Thirteen corrections.

Thirteen. A fitting place to end. I've made a decision. It is nearly time, to join Julie. Blair will be the last. I am become so weary. Heaviness of events bearing so hard on my aching bones. The Devil agrees. An ending imminent. Luck running out. The dark one sharing my exhaustion. Lightening the load just enough to keep me going.

Other numbers. Sterilisation points. Scotland. England. Ireland. Wales. Never the same place twice. Deserving causes every one. More muggers. A rapist and a paedophile. No patterns. No traces. No clues.

A mugger beaten at his own game. Just an old fashioned Professor Plum with the spanner near the library. So simple. Another statistic to be forgotten. A crime demanding to be unsolved. Scum cannibalised by scum. Soon ancient history. A sigh of relief.

Such deep job satisfaction. I'm good with muggers. Seven in total. Three rapists (one the paedophile). My particular favourite. They get special treatment. Doped up to the eyeballs with my LSD. Talk them through minds door and leave them in a bad place. Tape the eyes open. Show them the photos of those who went before. Tape the mouth shut. They do not deserve the relief that screaming can bring.

The best an accident. The right place at the right time. The infamous Theodore - The Razor - Logan. A Godfather. So much happiness caused by Its death. Smiling at the newspapers. Smiling at the TV's. A car accident witnessed in the wee small hours. A drunken eighty miles per hour into a builders skip full of scrap iron.

Demanding help. Offering money. Begging like so many of Its victims. A creature of insanity trapped in the pain of Its Nowness. A dam bursts. Watching Its own redness dribble into the gutter where it is so at home. Singing blood. Humming pain. So much self pity. Nothing for the victims. Just the self and the self and the self.

A single tiny match ignites so much petrol. A new tool. Such sweet screams. Such exquisite agony. Such rapturous empathy. Such suitable compassion. In flame, I release. In flame, I correct. In flame, I love...

Chapter Twelve

Dem Dry Bones

*“...Earth, Fire, and Water, are sacred, and must
not be contaminated by contact with a dead body.
Hence corpses must not be burned, neither
must they be buried...”*

Mark Twain

I felt like crying and expected Poppy's tears would soon flow (again), but I was wrong.

“Perhaps there is another way out?” said Poppy.

“Probably,” said Spider coughing through the dust, “We could follow one of the other strings of lights and see where they go?”

“Why would they lead to another way out? Darkness only found the way in by accident when some bricks fell out of the wall,” I said beyond caring.

“Well what the *hell* do you suggest then?” shouted Spider losing his temper for the first time since I'd known him.

“I don't know!” I shouted back.

“Follow the yellow brick road,” said Beaky. The tension was broken and we all gave a weak snort of laughter.

“Why not?” I said.

Accompanied by the hissing of the gas cylinders, we started to follow one of the other strings of lights. Eventually it ended at another trellised padlocked door beyond which was impenetrable darkness.

“Burn through the lock,” I said.

“No,” said Spider, “I checked earlier. There is plenty of oxygen, but not a lot of acetylene left. Once that's gone, we are in one deep pile of shit.”

“Spider!” frowned Poppy.

“Sorry,” said Spider.

“Maybe this is a way out?”

“And maybe it isn’t,” said Spider. He poked the flame through the trellis and peered through another gap. Curious, I joined him. So did Poppy. Ruth started to sing the Beatles *‘Paperback Writer’* drunkenly and very quietly.

“Can’t see anything,” he said.

“Nor me. Burn the lock off,” I said again.

“I don’t want to waste the gas.”

“Just do it. There *must* be a reason for the lock?”

“Maybe it’s the way out?” said Poppy.

Under its blue flame, the weak lock melted like butter. I took the torch off Spider, yellowed the flame and crept into the room. Defined within the flames yellow sphere of flickering radiance, the room beyond was strewn with bones. Judging by their size, they had to be human. I picked one up and it practically crumbled away to dust.

Nearby, there was a slabs not unlike the ones in the cells of Burlington police station. Just a bit taller and wider. There was a pile of clothing on it. No? Not clothing? Dawning realisation. It was...

“Spider, don’t let the girls in here,” I said grimly.

“Why not, dad?” said Poppy pushing her way past Spider. “Oh, look!” she exclaimed, “A dead body! Neat!”

And that is what it was. A dead body. Unlike the bones on the floor this body was of recent origins. Dressed in stained jeans and a very clean *Guns ‘n’ Roses* tee-shirt. There was no hair on the corpse and there were large holes countersunk into the skull. Red crud rimmed the dark holes. The face was all dried out, but unmistakable male.

“Ruth!” I lost my temper.

“Yes, darling?” she said from the doorway.

“Can you stop singing?”

“Certainly, my husband will be home any minute now,” she said and started to sing Queen’s *‘Bohemian Rhapsody’*.

In the light from the flame, something glinted. I gave Spider the torch back and stooped towards the corpse. This close, I could smell it. Powerful old socks and digestive biscuits. There was a gold monogrammed ring on a finger. The initial ‘R’ I moved the arm to get a better look and the hand fell off and rolled to the floor.

“Oh, Jeez!” Poppy and I yelled in unison.

That short exclamation was the understatement of my life. I thought that it was just an expression, but I actually felt my blood run cold. The hairs on the back of my neck standing up whilst an icy hand caressed my spine. Just then a grey shadow flitted up to the middle corpse and landed on it. After my initial fright, I recognised the feather brain himself.

“Beaky! Leave it alone,” said Poppy as the feathered fiend started to peck at the corpse.

“Beaky! Come here you evil bird!” I called.

There came a loud pop and the flame went out. The two frights in quick succession had my heart hammering away like a steam hammer. Vestiges of LSD in my system started to rework on my brain. Multicoloured stars twinkled through the darkness.

“Goodnight,” said Ruth and stopped singing.

After a moment or two, Spider managed to re-light the torch.

“Not enough pressure to sustain a such a big flame,” said Spider.

“Is the gas running out?” I said worriedly.

“Och, don’t worry! There’s enough for hours if we don’t turn the pressure up too high.”

“What is this place?” asked Poppy.

“D’know,” I said, “Maybe a ancient Necropolis?”

“Necropolis, dad?”

“City of the dead,” I said.

“Oh!” said Poppy.

“Can you see any ghosts, Spider?” I said.

“No, none at all,” he said, “These people couldn’t have died in here.”

“Ghosts?” asked Poppy.

“It’s a long story,” said Spider.



Backtracking, we tried following one of the other strings of lights. In much the same way as the previous passageway, we passed several side passages. After what seemed

an eternity, we arrived at another of those trellis like doors. This one was open. The string of lights continued on through. The room beyond was not so much a room as a cavern. Maybe two hundred feet wide and fifty high. At the far end of the cavern, at least a thousand feet away, another string of weak lights lead in through another passageway. Unlike the current string, these were still powered. Things were looking promising...

"I wonder what this place is?" said Poppy.

Difficult to see in the dimness, I could just make out massive piles of greyish rubble against the left and right walls. So large were these piles that there was only a twenty foot wide path leading down the centre of the cavern.

"D'know," I said.

"Where is the fog coming from?" said Spider.

"Fog?" I said.

"At least it helps light up the place."

"What you on about Spider?"

"The glow from the fog. Surely your night vision ain't all that bad?"

"There ain't no fog?"

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"Your hallucinating," said Poppy.

"Oh?" said Spider.

"What exactly can you see?" I said.

"White, glowing, moving stuff. Quite thin here, but a few feet away piled up like a snow drift from the floor to the ceiling. Looks more like ghost flesh than fog. I think it must be ectoplasm."

Fearing the worst, I stopped wheeling the gas cylinders, took the torch off Spider and went over to the nearest pile of rubble. The gas hoses just reached and no more. At first, I could not work out what I was seeing. A closer examination revealed the detritus to be bones. Very ancient looking, crumbling bones that inclined up to join the ceiling. Skulls. Femurs. Ribs. Whole bodies taken to pieces and mixed together. No skin. No clothing. No artefacts. Just bones. Thousands, no *millions* of them. A *Reich* of bones.

"No wonder I can't see anything but fog?" said Spider.

“What has this got to do with fog?” I asked.

“This space is too small to contain all the ghosts. They’ve merged.”

“Merged?”

“A massive gestalt entity.”

“You mean it’s alive?”

“No,” said Spider sadly, “Not alive. Not dead. Just existing. Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“Release? Revenge? The need to finish dying? Who knows?”

It was then that I noticed the silent tears rolling down his face.

“You okay, Spider?”

“No. No, I’m not okay. Don’t think that I will ever be okay again. I can feel them. Sharp as lemon juice in a paper cut. A distillation of suffering. So *much* pain. An eternity of torment...”

Spider was staring into space. Now, talking just above a whisper.

“You cannot comprehend, Tony. You just can’t. You can’t. You can’t...” By now he was really weeping. His body shaking with sobs. I took him by the shoulders and shook him.

“Snap out of it! Filter it out. We got other problems,” I said.

“They’re conscious, Tony. They *know*! We’ve got to help them. *Got* to help them!”

I gave him a slap on the cheek which I did not really expect to work. He suddenly looked startled. A confused look crept over his face. He shook his head as if to clear a blockage.

“Sorry,” he said feebly and wiped his face with his hands.

“Com’on,” I said, handing back the hissing torch. With Spiders dramatics, I too was starting to see fog. It was not substantial and didn’t glow. Must be the LSD again? Just how long does the stuff keep on working?

By the time we had travelled about half the length of the cavern, I could make out furniture at the far end. There was a very large desk on which was placed a computer system. There was a printer, an angle poise lamp and some other (as yet unrecognisable) items. Behind this, hanging from the rock wall was a mirror. Beside the desk was an armchair. *Someone* was sitting in it.

“I don’t like the look of this,” I said.

“What?” said Spider.

“Looks like someone is expecting us?” I answered reaching for the welding torch.

“Can I have that?”

“Where? I can’t see. Fog too thick,” he said passing the torch over. Hoping the flame would not go out again, I turned the oxygen feed up. The broad yellow flame narrowed into a thin short blue lance.

“See if you can find a nice strong leg bone, Spider. You as well, Poppy.”

“Aw, dad! Ugh! Do I have to?” complained Poppy. I didn’t answer. They both did as told.

Nearing the focus of all the trouble, more and more things became recognisable. There was an overflowing wastepaper basket on the floor. A cappuccino machine and what seemed to be a small microwave was also on the desk. The face of the *someone* was hidden in shadow. It had to be Darkness? There was no one else it could be. A creeping dread informed me that it was *not* Darkness, but *someone* far more deadly. Someone not of this Earth. Perhaps the cloven one himself? No, don’t think that way, Tony. Not with all that LSD buzzing about in your system.

Our seriously slow band halted a dozen feet from the makeshift office. The *someone* was holding a small thin box. It was green and looked just like a long magazine from a gun. There was a small orange glowing LED on the side and a switch on the top. It was one of those safety switches with a red plastic hinged flip top cover. In the other hand was a familiar looking handgun.

For a while we all waited in near silence. Nothing but the murmur of the welding torch and the whir of the computers cooling fan. The *someone* lent forward into the light. Kilroy Silk? I blinked back the LSD and refocused. It *was* Darkness. An illogical relief washed over me.

“It would seem that I owe you an apology,” he said.

Murmuring and whirring...

“Sorry,” he said.

“Oh good,” I said, “That makes it all right.”

“I understand what you mean. I must atone.”

“Damn, right!”

“It is over. You can go.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes. That passageway over there leads back up to the war shelter,” he gestured.

After a moments consideration, I put the still burning welding torch on the floor and turned toward the indicated passage.

“Not the young...” he paused, “Lady. She must stay. We really *do* have a grudge to sort out.”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid!” I said, “What parent would hand over his child to a complete and utter psychopath like you?”

“Justice *must* be done,” he said softly.

“Justice my balls! What about justice for me?” I was suddenly in an all enveloping red hot rage. “Justice for a life ruined! A big fucking pile of fuck-KING shit dumped on me from a fucking great height! And for what? Fucking tell me what!”

“She wiped my hard disk drive.”

“Big fuck-KING deal! I have to live through all this pain ‘cause your shitty hard disk drive was wiped?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Damn fucking right I don’t!”

“Her pictures were on the disk drive.”

“Who’s bloody pictures?”

“*Her* pictures!” he bellowed that hard I flinched, “*Her pictures!* All her pictures! Every single one that I had! Don’t you understand? Every single picture that I had of her was wiped. The last proof of her existence. Gone in a flash! Julie. *My* Julie!” he started to cry.

“So I live through hell, just ‘cause you couldn’t be bothered to back up your hard drive?”

“No. I backed it up all right.” His voice was soft again, but the tears still flowed. “Backed it up loads of times. Again and again. Time after time without checking to see that it had worked. A pile of 10 gig tapes with nothing but *junk* on them. Nothing but lost dreams. Wasted dreams and lost reasons for keeping on keeping on. Lost reasons... and lost reasons... and *lost* reasons...”

I didn't know what to do. A reservoir opening. My rage draining away. Nothing to do except stand staring whilst he gently sobbed.

For a while he mumbled incoherently, then he closed his eyes and slumped forward. The gun dangling limply from his grasp. No fight left in him. It was just a matter of taking a few steps forward and taking the gun from him. He would not object. I took my chance and took a step forward...

As rock dust crunched beneath my feet, he recoiled at the sound, flung his eyes open and sat back in the chair. Jerking the gun in my direction, he held the small box suddenly high and flicked the cover off the switch. I stopped in my tracks. I suddenly knew without a doubt that this box thingy was something bad. *Something* very bad...

"The government left a legacy from the war. A rather wasteful one," he leant forward, sniffed hard and grinned, "Directly above our heads is one of three rotting tanks of diesel. Perhaps 50,000 gallons of unwanted fuel in each. The tanks are each mounted on legs between which is an unreasonably large amount of rather old C4 explosive. All wired up and ready to go. So old that it might not go off when I press this button." He rested a thumb on the button. "Shall we find out? All go out together? Last chance. The delinquent munchkin stays or we all go out together. What do you think Tony? You wanna come with play with me?"

"Wait," I said playing for time, "I've something important to tell you..."

"I'll give you a minute." He balanced the trigger box on the desk in front of him and leant on an elbow. "On you go." I considered rushing forward and trying to grab the box. With my bad leg and all the other aches and pains, I hadn't a hope in hell of succeeding. He'd probably shoot me before I was half way there, but there was nothing else to try. And then Poppy was stooping low, unclipping Petal's leash and whispering...

"Table. Box. Go get it."

Like greased lightning, Petal flowed across the gap to the desk. Standing on her hind legs, she leaped onto the desk and snatched up the trigger box.

"Hey!" complained Darkness springing to his feet and grabbing for her.

Petal was only in his grip for a few seconds before wriggling free with a yelp of pain. Still on the top of the desk, she took a pace or two forward. Did the most ridiculous looking handstand and blasted Darkness in the face with a forceful stream of

acid liquid. Instantly, Darkness was clutching at his eyes and staggering about. The gun flung to the floor. Then he gave a single long *blood* curdling scream. Surely the skunk juice couldn't be as bad as all that?

Oh, yes it could! Those previous little '*accidents*' of Petals had not been a realistic precursor of what the furred glamour-puss was truly capable off. To describe concentrated skunk scent as a foul smell is a massive understatement. Fetid. Disgusting. Stomach churning. The evil stench was all of these things and much more. It also bloody hurt! At first my eyes and nose. Seconds later my sinuses began to throb. Holy shit! You could even taste the stuff. Vomit flooded my throat and voided out on to the computer monitor which promptly exploded and burst into flames.

"Oh, Jezus!" moaned Spider. Beaky started to screech at the top of his screech and then flew off. Ruth made instinctively for the nearby exit passage. Poppy was also sick. All the time, Darkness was gasping and yelling as he reeled about. One hand at his eyes. The other scrabbling blindly at the desktop searching for the trigger box.

In the delayed seconds it took me to reach him, he found the trigger box. While he fumbled for the switch, I was upon him. Without a seconds thought, I punched him as hard as I could on the nose. This was the first time that I have ever hit anyone. By God was it a good one! His nose sort of exploded. He screamed again. I felt the cartilage crunch and blood splattered on my face. With his eyes screwed tightly shut, Darkness grappled with me for possession of the trigger box. We fell heavily across the desk knocking the burning monitor onto the waste paper basket. The monitor spilled the paper from the basket and hit the ground hard. The cathode ray tube imploded with an ear splitting crack. For a second the air was filled with millions of tiny glass fragments. The spilled waste papers caught fire. I had the trigger box.

"Gimme that back!" he yelled in blind panic.

"Spider!" I yelled back.

And Spider was there pulling him off me. Pulling like a maniac. Darkness lost his grip and his balance. Staggering several feet backwards, he fell heavily landing in the blue flame of the welding torch. Instantly he was ablaze. Engulfed in flames, he struggled to his feet. For a second, I considered trying to put the flames out. What to use? There wasn't anything to beat the flames out with. Surprisingly, Darkness was

not yelling in pain. He pin wheeled his arms and jerked from side to side shouting *'Huh! Huh!'*

During this, I became aware of the fog thickening. In his panic, Darkness staggered over to the pile of bones, tripped and fell head first into them. As he struggled at the flames, he tried to climb out of the pile. Materialising tendrils of glowing fog LSDed into fat tentacles. At first just pulling him back into the bone pile. Then contracting all over him. Greedily raping their way into his hot flesh. Gleefully bursting eyeballs. Filling his mouth, ears and lungs with icy fire. Screaming was out of the question. The fog contracted about him. Feeding on his life force. Sucking. Feeding. Veining with pulses of energy. Siphoning the power needed to finish the dying that had started so many centuries ago. The flames started to go out.

Then at last, Darkness was motionless. Drained of life. Bereft. A husk falling back into the bone pile. The fog desiccated the last few drops of life from him and wisped off into nothingness.

For some time, we stood and stared at the shrivelled smoking body. Then we started off on the long journey home.



In the house of Darkness, near the front door was a small table on which was a wickerwork bowl. In it, I found a set of car keys which fitted the Range Rover outside. None of us felt the need to talk. Even Ruth was quiet, but then again she did not know what planet she was on.

I took the driving seat and we set off for Scotland. A short drive along the road through the trees led to the main road. I turned on to it and drove a few hundred yards down to a wide lay-by. At this point, the road was raised enough so that the top of the cliff, which housed the old war shelter, could be seen. For a while, I gazed in silence. Wearily, I took the trigger box out of my pocket. Flicked the plastic cover off and pressed the button.

Nothing happened. Probably the explosive was in too bad a condition to do it's job? Or maybe the radio signal couldn't get through all that rock? And then there was a deep bass vibration coming up through the ground and into the car. Seconds later the

cliff went blurry. Another vibration and blur followed by a terrible noise as a substantial portion of the cliff face collapsed in upon its self. Let them try and find that body...



For hours, I drove through the dark night in near silence. We were freezing to death. All the windows were open in a vain attempt to get rid of the smell of vomit and skunk juice. The only sound was of Beaky scratching about, ripping chunks out of the leather seat covers.

Then it began to sink in. Divine in its resplendent glow, realisation of the future caused me to start laughing.

“Dad?” said Poppy.

“What’s so funny?” said Spider.

“I’ve just realised,” I said grinning, “Now that Darkness is out of the way, and I have the means detailed from his files, I can clear up all traces of his goings on.”

“Whit’s so funny about that?” said Spider.

“Well. It means, my fine friend, that I can also wipe all traces of how that fifteen million pounds got into my bank account. We are all stinking rich!”

“We are!” grinned Spider and we both laughed. Poppy didn’t seem to get it. The very young just do not realise the power that money can bring. Still laughing, two other events happened almost simultaneously.

First event...

“Excuse me,” said Ruth with a look of puzzlement, “But, how the hell did I get here? And where is here?”

“Mum!” said Poppy excitedly, “Your back!”

“Apparently? Back from where? The last thing I remember was that nice polite Inspector Raeburn offering me a drink from his hipflask. He had just told me that you were all dead. You are not dead though, are you? Is this a dream?”

“No. Not a dream,” I giggled, “It’s a long story, Ruth, but we are most assuredly alive.”

Other event...

“Erm, dad?”

“Yeah, Poppet?”

“I know why Beaky has been acting so oddly for the past half hour.”

“Why is that then?”

“He has just laid an egg...”

THE END

Authors Notes

Any real hackers out there will realise that I've had to muck about with the way a few things really work in order to make the story readable to 'normal' people. Because as Bob Geldof once sang, *'Watch out for the normal people. There is more of them than you...'* To write an accurately based work of fiction regarding hackers would be boring and unreadable to anyone else but other hackers.

Nevertheless, the key premises about which this novel is spun are valid and realistically portrayed. Any individual or organisation which claims to be unhackable is either mistaken or just plain lying. Indeed, one of the best ways in which to make your system a target is to boast about how unhackable it is.

This work has only just touched on the potential of the cyber stalker. There is much more that could have been included, but wasn't. Not only would it give a very small minority of the wrong sort of people bad ideas, but would possibly get me arrested for incitement to commit criminal acts.



The literature quotations at the beginning of each chapter came from texts supplied in electronic format by Project Gutenberg. This wonderful non-profit making organisation has collected masses of ASCII texts which distribution rights have been obtained either from the author or the works have expired from their original copyright. Their free downloads can be found on the Internet at :-

<http://www.promo.net/pg/>

Thanks for the editorial suggestions made by Louise Welsh and Tina Betts.

I am currently working on (amongst other things) a new novel called, "*The Bad Man*" which has nothing to do with the Internet at all (or at least it hasn't so far), but a lot to do with ghosts. Oh, by the way, Spiders blind uncle Spider will be turning up sooner than you think...



This Etext is a kinda shareware thingy. If you find that you have enjoyed it, you are obliged to either help spread the text about (dump it in alt.ebooks etc as often as you like - that is what it is there for) or go and buy a printed edition of one of my books. At the time of writing this, there are two printed books. '*The Tavern At The Edge Of Nowhere*' (ISBN 0-7388-2758-4 **Publisher Xlibris**) and '*Internet Scams - What To Be Afraid Of In Cyberspace*' (ISBN 1-873668-94-5 **Publisher Net.Works**).



Also at the time of writing, '*Jump On Zero*' has not yet secured a publishing contract. If you are a publisher and are interested write to datajunkie@bigfoot.com. Please note that this work is NOT suitable for subsidised or self-publishing due to the fact that I am skint. So please do not try to sell me any publishing services. I ain't interested honey and I'm libel to be *damn* rude about it...

About The Author

Bryan H. Joyce is a large very non-stereotypical *Scotsman* who doesn't have red hair, a beard or wear a kilt. He is an experienced computer consultant, qualified tutor, secretary and programmer who does not like programming except as an occasional hobby. In the past he has worked as a storeman, retail salesman, a waiter, a bar worker, a cleaner, a joiner, a cook, a tutor (*IT*), a technician (*IT*) and a haggis hunter (though he got the sack after 1 day on the grounds of letting the haggis escape). He loves all small fluffy animals and is scared of nothing except large animals, human beings and anything that looks, "...a bit scary...".

When he took up full time writing and finally came off of *Jobseekers Allowance*, he phoned up the *Job Centre* and blew a very large wet raspberry at the woman who always gave him his interviews (this maybe a lie). He is a non smoking, diabetic, teetotaler who loves crisps and does *not* do chewing gum (though he did experiment with it for a few years before coming to his senses).

Since he was 15 years old, he has written numerous plays, screenplays, novels, short stories and non-fiction on genres as diverse as science fiction, horror, humour, romance and information technology. In the year 2000, he decided to turn this enjoyable hobby in to his full time obsession. He does *not* write poetry (though he has been accused of prose) or indeed understand any other than that found in the lyrics of the rock group *Queen*. He is the author of "*Internet Scams - What To Be Afraid Of In Cyberspace*". A short science fiction e-novel (a Booknet.co.uk, book of the month for April 2001), "*The Tavern At The Edge Of Nowhere*" is available as a download from the Internet. Where from? Well, you could try the imaginatively titled www.bryanjoyce.co.uk. If that is not enough, you could also download a copy of his comedy stage play (first performed by 'No Mean Company' 31st August 2001), '*Someday, One Day*'. Both titles are currently a free download.

Bryan H. Joyce is of such a enormously substantial intellect that he does *not* need to refer to the instruction manual when reading a newspaper.

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